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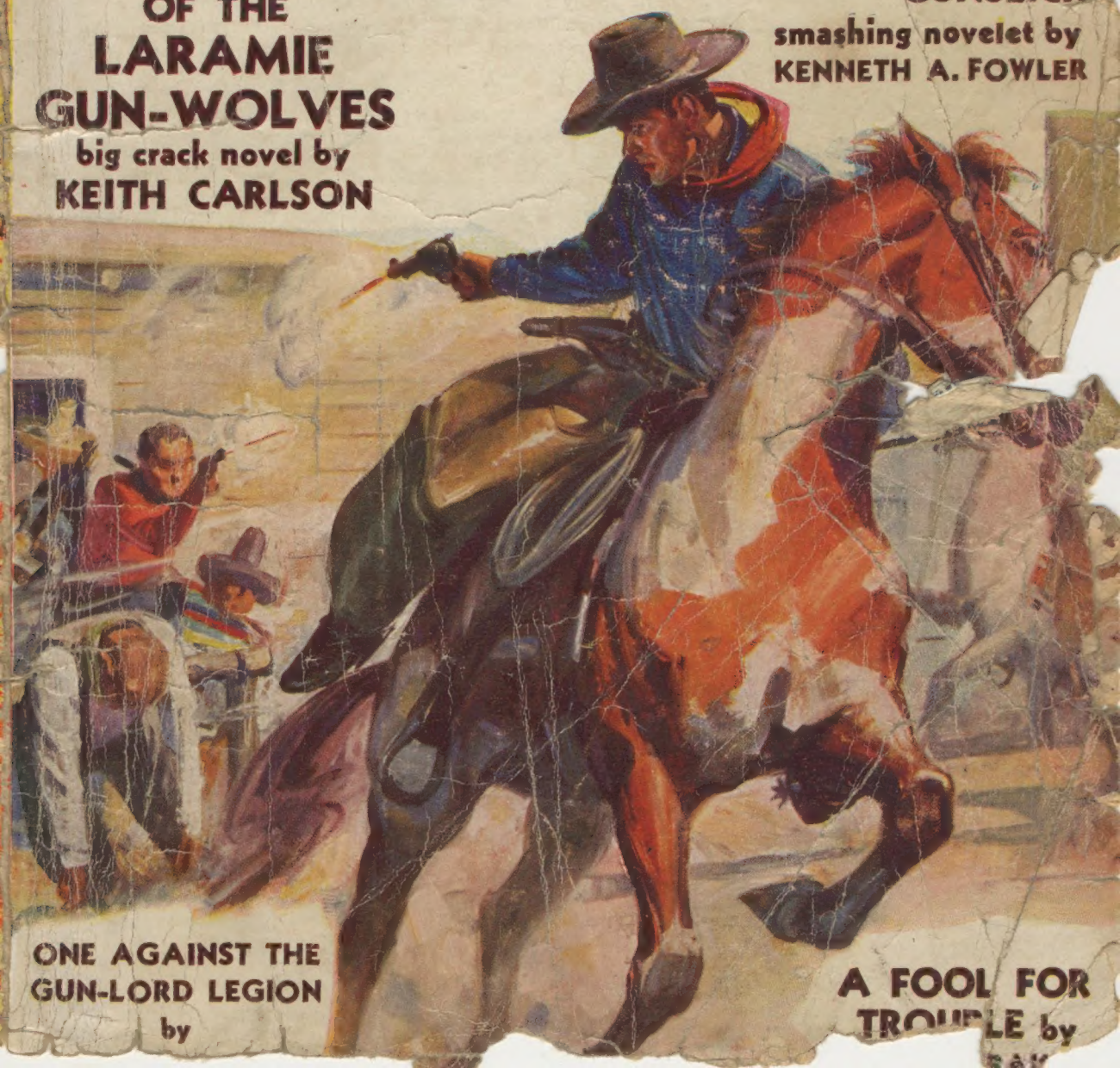

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10c Sept. 1939

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Wild West Stories and Complete Novel Magazine published every other month by Western Fiction Publishing Co., Inc. Office of publication, 4600 Diversey Ave., Chicago, Ill. Entered as second class matter April 11, 1938, at the Post Office, Chicago, Ill., under act of March 3, 1879. Editorial and Executive offices, 330 W. 42nd St., McGraw-Hill Bldg., New York. Yearly subscription, 60 cents. Not responsible for unsolicited scripts.

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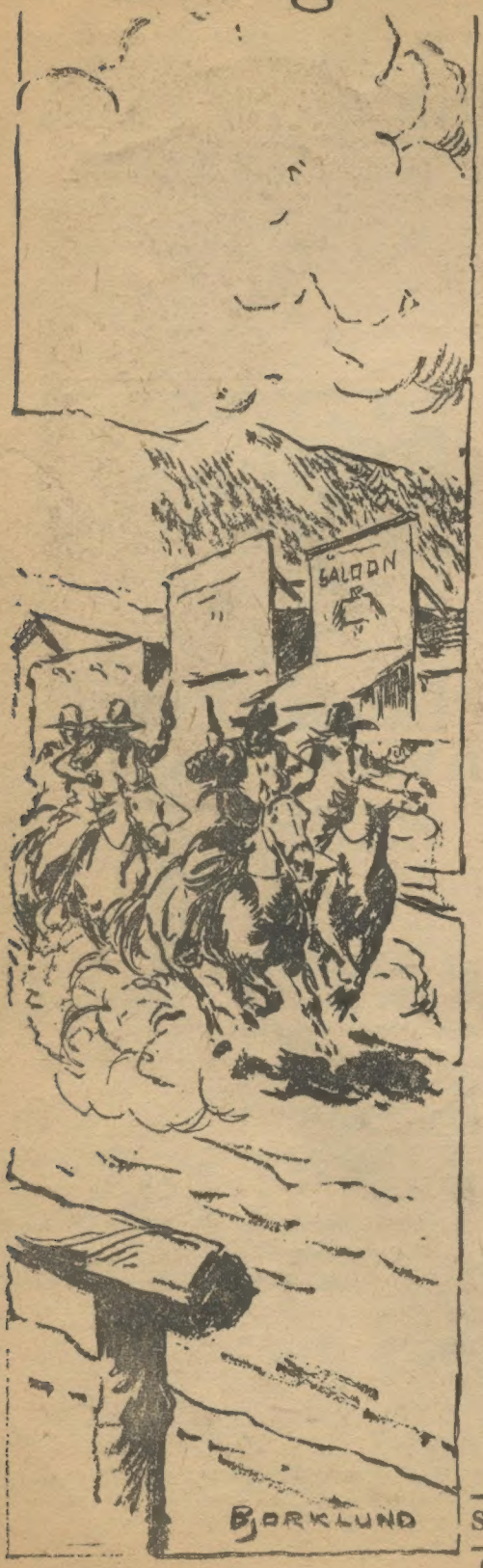
One Against the Gun-



THE sun was setting behind the ragged, crimson-splashed pinnacles that rimmed Brimstone Basin, slanting shadowy fingers across the rangeland, as young Pike Cassidy stood in the doorway of his little Running W ranch house and watched the four riders approach. And those shadows crept into Pike's heart, warning him of coming evil.

For Pike Cassidy recognized those four riders. At their head was Buck Flame, self-styled gun-lord of Brimstone Basin, who dreamed of empire—a big, red-haired man with a slab-like body, and with brooding evil and cruelty engraved on his flat, dark features. Buck Flame was ruthless, a brutal fighter, a man-breaker. And he meant to break Pike Cassidy.

The three riding with Flame were his hired gunslicks. Jess Gephart, a squat, hook-nosed gent; Ike Shane, a slim, blond, flashy-dressing little hombre—and a coppery-faced, cold-eyed breed named Apache Joe.

Pike Cassidy didn't move from the doorway of his three-room log cabin ranch house as the four riders pulled their horses to a halt thirty feet away. His tall, powerful figure blended with the shadows in the room behind him. Crossed gunbelts, holding a pair of bone-handled Colts, encircled his lean waist; a rifle leaned against the wall.

Pike's gray eyes were cold and wary as he faced Buck Flame and his gunnies. Flame, he knew, wasn't on a friendly visit.

Buck Flame shifted his weight to one stirrup, shoved his white Stetson back from flaming red hair. He said, "Cassidy, come out here. I've got somethin' to talk over with yuh."

"Talk on," Pike Cassidy clipped. "I can hear yuh from here. Talk, then get off of Running W land!"

SMASHING FEATURE-LENGTH

Lord Legion

By GUNNISON STEELE

Author of "Glory Guns for Graybeards," etc.

For three long years Pike Cassidy had slaved and starved to build up his little Running W spread, and it was going to take more than hot lead to restake his claim!

"All right," Flame snapped. "Here it is: You're through here, Cassidy! You've got till tomorrow night to get outa the Basin. Get out, or the buzzards'll carry yuh out. That's orders!"

Pike Cassidy's thin lips peeled back from strong white teeth. "I don't take orders from you, Flame—from no man! This outfit belongs to me. For three years I've worked and starved and slaved to build it up. And I've made it pay, in spite of the fact that durin' the last year you've stolen my cows, cut my fences, poisoned my waterholes, done everything you could to drive me out. You may murder me, like you've murdered others. But everything I own and love in the world is here in this valley, and I'm stayin', one way or another. And if the buzzards eat, they'll have some skunk meat to balance their diet. If Tonto Drake wasn't too dead to talk, he could tell yuh that!"

FOR a moment nobody spoke. Buck Flame darted a glance over his shoulder at his gunslicks. Gephart and Ike Shane nudged their broncs forward, one on each side of Flame. The runty Shane was grinning; Gephart was licking his thick lips.

"That's another thing," Buck Flame intoned. "You killed Tonto Drake this evening. Drake was my friend. I'm

NOVELETTE OF A BATTLE-CUB WHO CAME BACK!

lettin' yuh off easy, lettin' yuh leave the valley. You tried to kill Joe Tuttle, but he got away. Tuttle says you cut down on him and Drake from a gulch."

"Then Tuttle is a stinkin' liar, and you know it!" Pike said flatly. "Tuttle and Drake had cut a hole in my fence over on the western line; they were driving a dozen of my cows over onto yore Coffin outfit. I caught 'em in the act, jumped 'em, and they started throwin' lead. I slung some back, just a little straighter. I got Tonto Drake, and Tuttle turned tail like the yella snake he is. Tonto Drake got the same dose any other of yore thievin' gunnies will get if I catch 'em drivin' off Running W cattle!"

"Big talk!" Flame sneered. "But it won't help yuh none. You had yore chance, Cassidy. If yuh'd played in with me, like I give yuh a chance to, you coulda kept yore two-bit outfit and made some easy money on the side. But you didn't have sense enough to do it. You decided to fight me."

"I don't want to fight—I just crave to be let alone—"

"You had yore chance," Flame went on, his tones flat and savage. "Now you get out! You'll find out, like other fools in this Basin have, that yuh cain't stand up to Buck Flame. I own half of it already; another year and I'll own all of it—the biggest cattle empire west of the Missouri. And them as stand in my way gets tromped on!"

"And that's big talk, Flame," Pike Cassidy ripped out harshly. "Too big, mebby. You think yuh've got all the decent folks in Brimstone buffaloed. But yore wrong. You've killed some, driven others from their homes. But there's a few left who have guts to fight, and they will. They'll whip yuh from the face of the earth, plant yore filthy carrion so deep its stench won't ever rise ag'in in the nostrils of decent folks!"

A savage curse whipped from Buck Flame's lips. His hand, and the hands of his gunslicks, snaked downward. But Pike Cassidy had anticipated that. Already his brown hands had flashed downward, and up, and the gaping black muzzles of two .45s stared at the startled killers.

"Go on," Pike invited, his voice a velvety purr. "I'd as soon start snake killin' now as later!"

The clawed hands of the four gunnies froze in mid-air. They knew the deadliness of those guns in Pike Cassidy's hands. Baffled fury writhed Buck Flame's brutal countenance. Then, the next instant, Pike saw something that sent a cold tingle racing along his spine.

Flame was still mouthing curses, but something came into his little tawny eyes. Something that warned Pike Cassidy of peril at his back.

At the same instant, he heard a slight noise in the room behind him. He whirled—just in time to see a shadowy figure hurtling across the room, gun-hand upraised. Pike sent his lean body curveting aside, his left-hand gun blazing a streamer of flame through the shadows.

But the shot went wild. For that cannonading figure was upon him, the hand holding the gun had chopped savagely downward, and the room seemed to explode in a million zooming lights before his eyes. Fierce pain lanced through him as the clubbed gun smashed him to the floor.

BITTERLY, in the instant before he lost consciousness, he berated himself for allowing Buck Flame to trick him. While he watched those in front, another of Flame's gunmen had sneaked through the back doorway and jumped him from behind!

Flame, he knew now, hadn't come to warn him out of the Basin. He was bent on something more sinister.

As whispery darkness closed over him, Pike Cassidy wondered if he would ever see another sunrise. . . .

A moon rode high in the sky when he groped slowly back to consciousness. He lay a moment, bewildered, staring up into the star-dotted sky. His head ached dully. He could feel dried blood on his face. Then, as memory returned, he tried to get up.

But he could barely move. Startled, Pike Cassidy turned his head. Gradually, then, he realized the diabolically cruel death Buck Flame had planned for him.

For he lay spread-eagled on the ground, each outstretched hand and foot lashed to stakes that had been driven into the hard earth!

Fierce anger stormed through Pike Cassidy. With all the strength of his powerful body he strained against the stakes that held him. Then he quieted. It would take the strength of a bull to budge one of those stakes.

Pike stared about him. From the position of the moon he judged it was long past midnight. Rough, barren ground lay on all sides of him. To the north, so close their crests were almost over him, towered a line of dark peaks.

Quick despair stabbed at Pike. From those peaks, he knew that he was in the extreme northern end of Brimstone Basin—a desolate, sun-blasted expanse of *malpais* where there was little life except the buzzard and rattlesnake. There was no ranch near, for in these badlands there was no grass for cattle. Men shunned this waterless region, except those who wanted a place to hide from the law.

In keeping with his savage nature, Buck Flame hadn't been satisfied with merely killing him. He'd staked Pike Cassidy to the ground, so he would die slowly, horribly.

Fighting the despair in his heart, his head reeling with pain, Pike tried to think. He knew he could expect no aid. If any of Flame's men returned, it would be only to taunt him. None of the few honest ranchers left in the Basin would know of his predicament.

As he lay there, helpless, cold and stiff from the strong night wind that moaned down from the peaks, the moon slid down toward the western horizon. A coyote yapped in the malpais nearby. Then several of the scrawny, starved beasts, emboldened by his helplessness, approached, staring with fiery, greedy eyes at him.

In a sudden frenzy, Pike writhed on the ground, yelling at the beasts. Startled, they slunk back into the shadows. But soon they drew in close again. They circled round and round his prone figure, jaws slavering, whimpering hungrily.

THE moon touched the peaks in the west. Shadows swooped. And the hungry coyotes drew still closer. Fascinated, Pike Cassidy watched them. He was hoarse from yelling, exhausted from writhing about on the ground. Soon those things, he knew, wouldn't hold them back.

Then, just as the moon went down, relief surged over him. The eastern sky was graying. The gray streaks spread from the sky into the bare, harsh land. Then the blood-red sun eased into the sky, and the circling coyotes vanished.

Almost instantly, the sun's rays became blistering. The wind died, and a vast silence descended. The heat brought out the huge red desert ants. They crawled over the hot sand, over Pike's face, and even worked underneath his clothing and made fiery trails over his sweaty body.

The sun arced into the brassy sky. Its fierce heat was like a million needles pricking at Pike Cassidy's face. A hot wind washed across the malpais, stinging his face and eyes with lashing pel-

lets of sand. Thirst tightened his throat.

Then the buzzards, ghastly symbols of death, circled low over him. Half a dozen of them wheeled in lowering glides, so close he could hear their loathsome hissing. After a while one of the scavengers flapped to the ground. Soon it was joined by the others, and they sat in a circle about him on the sandstone boulders, like ghouls in solemn conclave.

Pike Cassidy didn't yell at the buzzards, as he had at the coyotes last night. Last night. . . . It seemed like ages since the sun had risen. His throat was too dry and tight to yell; he was too weak from pain and thirst to tug at the stakes. He just lay there and watched the waddling buzzards, listening to their foul, greedy croaking.

Finally, as the coyotes had, the buzzards grew bolder. They waddled still closer, staring at him with their reddish eyes. One got so close it tumbled over his booted foot. Enraged, he croaked a curse at it, tried to kick out with his bound foot. Startled, the buzzards backed away with harsh, hissing sounds.

Then they gathered closer again. Soon, Pike knew, they would start pecking at his eyes and face. Nauseated, he stared with bitter eyes at the huge black birds. . . .

Then, suddenly, wonderment rushed over Pike. All at once the buzzards were tumbling crazily over the sand, flapping awkwardly as they tried to take to the air. Then Pike's gaze lifted and if his throat hadn't been so dry he would have whooped with joy at what he saw.

A horse and rider had halted a few yards away. The rider—a freckled, towheaded button of no more than ten—tumbled hastily to the ground and came running toward Pike Cassidy. He dropped to the ground beside Pike, his blue eyes wide and terrified, tears streaming over his dusty cheeks.

"Are—are yuh all right, Pike?" the youngster asked anxiously. "Did I get here in time?"

Pike Cassidy grinned painfully with dry, cracked lips.

"Okay—button," he whispered. "But a little while longer—and the buzzards woulda had their meat."

"The stinkin', dirty skunks," the boy said fiercely. "Buck Flame and his gunnies, I mean. Hang on, pard, I got a knife here . . . I'll cut yuh loose!"

HE brought out an old, broken bladed pocketknife and started hacking feverishly at the ropes that bound Pike's wrists and ankles. And Pike lay there, thankfulness flooding through him. Back in his mind, though he hadn't dared hope, had been this freckled youngster all day.

His name was Billy Peters, and he was the son of Jeff Peters, who owned the Three Star outfit which joined Pike's place on the south. Billy was a plucky, intelligent little tike, and he thought Pike Cassidy was about the swellest gent in the world. He rode over to the Running W every chance he got, and Pike had taught him to ride and rope and shoot, and to make a lot of things. Billy was the best friend Pike Cassidy had.

Jeff Peters was Pike's friend, too. Along with the other honest ranchers of the basin, they'd banded together in what they called the Desperation Pool, to fight Buck Flame. Some of these ranchers had already been driven from their homes by Flame. Outlawed, they lived in the surrounding hills, waiting for the day when the last bitter, showdown fight against Flame's gun-legion would be made. . . .

It took Billy half an hour to hack through the stout ropes that bound Pike Cassidy to the stakes. As he hacked

with the old knife, he told how he had come to find Pike in the badlands.

"I saw smoke this mornin' over toward yore place," he said. "Figured somethin' was wrong, so I saddled my pony and rode over there. But I shore didn't expect to find yore house burned to the ground!"

Pike asked hoarsely, "Burned?"

"Yeah, burned! It was in ashes when I got there, so it musta happened last night. And yore fences cut, and everything tore all to heck. 'Course I knowed Buck Flame was behind it. I—when I couldn't find you, I was scared yuh'd been in the house when it burned. But I kept lookin' around, and finally spotted tracks where four-five hosses had headed off this way. Mile north of the house, I found yore hat. Then I just followed the tracks, and here I am. What happened, pard?"

But Pike waited till he was free, till his thirst had been quenched by water from the canteen on Billy's saddle, to tell what had happened. Then Billy helped him into the saddle, climbed up behind him, and they headed south toward Jeff Peters' Three Star outfit.

For Pike Cassidy, like a dozen other ranchers in Brimstone Basin, was homeless. But he wasn't licked. Buck Flame, he vowed grimly as he passed the smoking embers of his burnt cabin, would pay in full for each second he'd roasted out there under that hellish sun. . . .

Three nights later Pike Cassidy attended a meeting of the Desperation Pool. Always held at a different spot, tonight the meeting had been called in a clearing beside a creek that wound through the foothills. A fire glowed in the center of the clearing, throwing weird red light over the gaunt, sober faces of the members.

Thirty or forty, in all. Gray-bearded ranchers, lean, reckless-faced waddies, all gunbelted, all grim-faced and tight-lipped. All of them, or their friends, had felt the hard grind of Buck Flame's ruthless heel. Some of their homes had been burned, as Pike Cassidy's had, their ranges looted. All were eager to ride against Flame's cut-throats in a showdown fight.

But, during the last few months, the oldsters had counseled patience; they had to be reasonably sure of success before they struck. Now, however, as Jeff Peters stood before them and told of Buck Flame's latest outrage—of how Pike Cassidy had been staked out to die in the malpais, of how his ranch-house had been burned, his property destroyed—a rising murmur of rage and hate filtered through the crowd.

PIKE kept to the background, with little to say. These men were his friends. But he asked no man to fight his battles. Hate for Buck Flame was like a hot wind in his heart; he meant to take vengeance, but in his own way.

He listened to what old Tom Drago, a rawboned, gray-bearded rancher, had to say as he stood straight and grim in the fireglow.

"We've waited long enough, as long as we dare," old Drago rumbled. "Now we've got tuh fight. Fight for our homes, our land, our lives. I came here in '70, when the Basin was a howling wilderness. I fought and slaved, to make it a good place for decent, law-abidin' folks to live, and some of you here helped me.

"Then Buck Flame came, a tinhorn card-slick with a bunch of gunnies at his back. We've stood by, helpless, while he gutted our range, burned our homes, killed our sons and friends. We've licked Buck Flame's shiny boots, and watched him grow more powerful and arrogant with each month. We've watched him turn the town of Brimtone from a quiet, decent place where our women could walk in safety, into a

stinkin' hell-hole of thievery and murder, of roarin' honkytonks and painted wenches.

"Now the time has come to either get outa the Basin, or fight. What'll it be, men, run like whipped coyotes—or fight?"

In the short silence that followed, the wind whispered bleakly through the tangled bottomlands. Then a chorus of voices lifted eagerly.

"Fight—fight!"

Old Drago lifted his gnarled hand. "Then we'll fight," he said grimly. "Four nights from now, every man-jack of you come here to this spot as soon as it's dark. Bring yore guns, and plenty shells. We'll ride into Brimstone and give Buck Flame a dose of his own medicine. From here on—it's war!"

A measure of hope had returned to Pike Cassidy as he rode with Jeff Peters away from the meeting. His ranch was gone, and most of his cattle. But if Buck Flame could be killed, or the Basin rid of his cruel rule, he could start over again.

Impatience rode him hard the next two days. He was eager for the fight with Flame's gunnies. But he could do nothing alone. He dared not ride into Brimstone; Buck Flame was never without his cordon of gun-guards.

Buck Flame owned the big Coffin brand outfit, but he lived in an imposing white house in Brimstone. Most of his time he spent in his Green Snake saloon and gambling hall. The Green Snake was but one of the roaring honkytonks Flame owned. Gradually, by ruthless, treacherous methods, he was driving the smaller ranchers out of the Basin.

After Pike Cassidy, he had marked Jeff Peters for ruin. And Peters, a solid, yellow-haired giant, was fighting back, knowing that only by the quick aid of the Desperation Pool could he save his Three Star ranch. The nearest law was in the county seat, forty miles away, and the sheriff seldom bothered to come to Brimstone, except when he wanted votes. Gun-law was the only law hell-roaring Brimstone knew.

THOSE first two days after the meeting of the Pool in the bottom, Pike Cassidy spent in riding Peters' fences, guarding against Flame's raiders. Most of the time young Billy Peters rode with him. Billy was a plucky, likable button; he carried a .22 pistol to help fight Flame's gunnies.

Pike knew he owed his life to the freckled youngster. His own cattle driven off by Flame's riders, Pike figured he could partially pay the debt he owed Billy by helping guard the Three Star against the Brimstone raiders. . . .

It happened suddenly, so suddenly Pike Cassidy was caught flat-footed.

It was just after sun-up of the third morning after the meeting of the Desperation Pool, as Pike and Billy Peters were following a cattle path along a shallow gulch near the southern boundary of the Three Star, when a swift premonition of lurking danger rushed over him.

He ducked, yelled a warning to Billy. But he was too late. There was a hissing sound, and a rope snaked out from behind a boulder beside the trail. Pike grabbed for his gun with one hand, his other clawing at the rope as it settled over his shoulders. But the rope tightened, jerked him from the saddle.

He hit the rocky ground with a numbing jar. Stars zoomed before his eyes as his head thudded against a rock. Only half-conscious, unable to move, he saw two men leap out from behind the boulder—Jess Gephart and Apache Joe.

The squat Gephart snatched Pike Cassidy's guns from their holster, and stood back, grinning. Slowly, Pike's head cleared. He sat up, bitter-eyed at having been tricked so easily.

Apache Joe had dragged Billy Peters from his saddle and taken his shiny .22 pistol. Billy was kicking and clawing in the breed's grasp, spitting out man-sized words of rage.

Gephart prodded Pike to his feet, growled, "This time, cowpoke, there won't be no slip-up—the buzzards will eat!"

"Do what yuh please with me, Gephart," Pike said harshly. "But hurt that kid and I'll kill yuh if I have to follow you plumb to hell!"

"You won't talk so big 'fore I'm through with yuh," Gephart grinned, and flashed a glance at the breed. "Apache, you know yore orders. Get started with the brat!"

Apache Joe grunted, flung Billy back onto his pony. But the youngster fought furiously. He kicked out fiercely, and the high heel of his boot caught the breed under the chin, rocking him backward.

Apache Joe spat out an oath, swung his open hand savagely against the kid's face. The blow stunned Billy, and he would have tumbled to the ground if the breed hadn't caught him.

Murder in his heart, Pike Cassidy started forward. But Jess Gephart jabbed a gun-muzzle into his back, and he was forced to watch helplessly as the breed lashed Billy to his saddle. Tears streaming down his dusty cheeks, Billy was still struggling.

"You dirty snakes!" he shrilled. "You hurt my pard, and I'll get loose and gun yuh down!"

"Get started, Apache," Gephart ordered curtly.

TWO saddled horses were concealed a short distance along the canyon, and a moment later Pike watched as the breed rode away with Billy Peters. They rode east, toward Brimstone. Cold fear rushed suddenly over Pike Cassidy. Obviously the trap hadn't been planned for him—they'd wanted Billy Peters.

"Get onto that hoss, cow-prod," Gephart ordered then. "And don't try no tricks, or yuh won't live to find out what Buck Flame's got planned for yuh!"

Silently, Pike obeyed. Gephart, he knew, would kill him on the slightest provocation. And, to help Billy Peters, he had to stay alive.

They rode to the south, through a hole that had been cut in the line fence and onto Buck Flame's Coffin spread. Thirty minutes later they stopped before a log cabin in a rough, hilly section, and at Gephart's order, Pike dismounted and went inside.

The cabin was bare, except for a stove, a rude bunk and two or three boxes. The one room had no windows. A ladder led upward through a hole in the ceiling to a loft.

Gephart seemed nervous and in a hurry.

"Don't reckon yuh'll leave here in a hurry," he grinned. "Just make yoreself at home till I get back!"

The squat gunman went out, closed the door, and Pike heard a chain rattling in the padlock he'd noticed on the door as he entered. A moment later he heard a clatter of hoofs.

Like a trapped cougar, Pike Cassidy looked about the room. The walls were made of thick, firm logs and chinked with mud. Even the door had been fashioned of three-inch thick strips of oak; and it was padlocked from the outside.

Pike Cassidy grunted, climbed the rickety ladder to the loft. It was dark in the loft, and steaming hot. But, as his eyes became accustomed to the shadows, he saw that the roof had been made of split logs and covered over with sod and grass. Not a chink showed, and the log strips were solid as a rock.

Now Pike savvied why Jess Gep-

hart hadn't been afraid to leave him alone in the cabin. There wasn't a chance for escape!

As he started to descend, Pike stumbled over a bulky object. He stooped curiously. It was a bundle of blankets. In a separate blanket was wrapped a meager supply of canned provisions.

At first Pike had thought that this was an abandoned line cabin. But quite obviously Buck Flame had built it with a view to putting it to other uses. Pike grunted again, straightened, his head almost bumping the low eaves, conscious of a sharp, hissing sound somewhere nearby.

Then suddenly a searing pain ripped into his cheek. He ducked, slapping at the small, slashing object that clung to his flesh. Crouching there, he stared at the webby-looking object, half a foot thick, that dangled from the eaves.

A huge wasp nest. The buzzing sound came from the hundreds of vicious insects that had become angered by his proximity. The wasps were of the "yellow jacket" variety, most vicious of the breed.

Rubbing his cheek, where an aching lump was already rising, Pike descended the ladder.

AFTER a while he gave up all hopes of escape from the cabin, and seated himself on one of the boxes and awaited Gephart's return. Bitterness and impatience rode him hard. Self-blame was like gall in his heart. He'd promised to take care of Billy Peters; but he'd bungled dismally, and now the button was in deadly peril.

Of that he was sure, although he had no idea why Buck Flame had kidnaped Billy Peters. No one could guess what dark deed the twisted brain of Flame would plan in his march to empire. . . .

It was past mid-evening when Gephart returned. The squat killer was sullen and ill-humored, and half-drunk. But he was wary enough to come into the cabin with a gun in his hand. He stood spread-legged, and stared scowlingly at Pike Cassidy.

"Gent don't get no rest on this spread," he complained. "Hyar I been in a saddle all day without a bite to eat, and no rest in sight yet. It ain't right."

"Where's Billy Peters?" Pike asked flatly, his eyes icy cold. "If yuh hurt a hair on that kid's head . . ."

"He ain't been hurt—not yet," Gephart said, and grinned wolfishly. "But that ain't sayin' he won't be, if Jeff Peters don't come across."

"Meanin' what?" Pike snapped.

"Won't do no harm to tell yuh, seein' as yuh ain't never gonna leave this cabin alive," Gephart said. "Buck Flame had the button kidnaped. He's holdin' him in the Green Snake, in Brimstone. Little while ago Flame and some of us boys rode out to Peters' place. Flame told Jeff Peters that unless he signed over the Three Star to him, lock, stock and barrel, he wouldn't ever see the brat again.

"Peters showed fight, and he was hurt a little. Not bad—not enough to keep him from signin' a deed to the Three Star. He's stubborn now. But when Buck Flame brings him one of the kid's ears, or a finger mebby, he'll sign!"

Both fire and ice pulsed in a raging stream through Pike Cassidy's veins. Buck Flame, he knew, was capable of doing those awful things. And Jeff Peters probably was a prisoner at his ranch—none of the Basin ranchers knew of what had happened.

The Desperation Pool would ride tomorrow night—but that would be too late to help Billy Peters!

Jess Gephart's voice seemed to come from a distance: "I'm hungry as a she-wolf. While I kindle a fire in the stove, you climb up in that loft and pitch down them cans."

Stiffly, Pike climbed up the ladder.

He made his way to the blanket that held the cans. And again that angry buzzing sounded in his ears. Pike Cassidy stared thoughtfully at the wasp nest.

"Hurry with that grub," Gephart called from below.

"Comin' right down," said Pike Cassidy, and grinned slowly.

He reached for one of the empty blankets. Then he rose slowly to his feet, the blanket spread wide in his hands, and inched over till he was directly underneath the dangling yellow jacket nest.

Suddenly he reached upward, flinging the blanket about the nest with its clinging horde of angry wasps. Quickly he gathered the blanket edges together, imprisoning the droning insects.

He strode to the hole in the ceiling.

"Give me a hand with this stuff, Gephart," he called.

Gun in hand, Gephart came and stood directly under the hole, staring suspiciously upward.

"Catch it!" Pike Cassidy snapped, and with a quick motion he flipped the blanket downward, at the same time releasing the edges so that the horde of now thoroughly angry wasps were set free.

THE blanket fell full across Gephart's face and shoulders like a shroud, holding a large portion of the insects near his exposed features. The squat killer screamed with sudden pain, and the gun in his hand clattered to the floor as Gephart clawed with frantic hands at the blanket and the clinging wasps that Pike knew must be stabbing at his face and body with a hundred fiery lances.

As he flung the blanket, Pike leaped backward to the center of the loft and lay flat on the floor, listening to the pandemonium that had broken loose below. The cabin trembled as Gephart staggered blindly about the room, screaming, beating frantically but with utter futility at the cloud of yellow jackets that were venting their fury on him.

By now Gephart had flung the blanket aside. But still the vicious insects swarmed about him, darting in to stab with their poison stingers at his flesh. Blinded with pain and terror, the gunman reeled about the room, unable to find the closed door. Gradually Gephart's threshings became less violent; his screams and curses died to whimpering moans.

Then, somehow, Gephart got the door open, and the wasps, their wrath appeased somewhat, swarmed from the room. But the killer, his eyes swollen so he was unable to see, continued to slap and claw at his face, thinking the wasps were still clinging to him.

Pike Cassidy climbed slowly down the ladder. He took the gun from the floor where Gephart had dropped it, and another from Gephart's belt. Gephart had sat down on one of the boxes, and was whimpering like a dog in pain.

Pike looked without pity at the cowering gunman. Gephart had deserved what he got.

"You'll live, Gephart," Pike said grimly. "And die with lead in yore belly, if I ever meet yuh ag'in!"

Then Pike went outside. In a pole corral behind the cabin was his own roan bronc. He slapped bridle and saddle onto the roan, leaped into the saddle and raced northward.

It took him less than thirty minutes of furious riding to reach the Three Star. Eyes wary, he slowed the roan as he approached. A single saddled horse, wearing the Coffin brand, stood at the rack out in front.

Pike dismounted, cat-footed across the porch and along a hallway, to the big living room. Jeff Peters lay on a couch, one shoulder stiff and bloody, his

face gray and haggard. In his hands were a pencil and a piece of paper.

Stooping over Peters was a slim, flashily-dressed hombre.

Pike said coldly, "Ike Shane, turn around!"

The blond little gunman, whirled, spitting like a startled cat. Then he grabbed for his gun. Fast—but not fast enough.

A gun had leaped into Pike Cassidy's hand. It roared, a streamer of flame writhed across the room, and Ike Shane buckled in the middle and pitched forward on his face.

PIKE strode forward, picked up the piece of paper from the floor where Peters had dropped it. It was a deed to the Three Star, made out to Buck Flame. Deliberately, Pike tore it to bits and tossed the pieces to the floor.

"You shouldn't uh done that," Peters whispered. "I—they've got my kid. They'll torture him, kill him, if I don't sign over the Three Star to Buck Flame."

"Signin' over yore outfit wouldn't help Billy," Pike rapped. "You hurt bad?"

"Just a bullet in my shoulder. But I can't ride. Pike, if yuh'll save my boy, yuh can have anything I've got—"

"Save that," Pike said swiftly. "You just rest easy, Jeff. The Pool ain't waitin' till tomorrow night to hit Brimstone—them ranihans are ridin' tonight!"

He went outside. His own roan was winded, so he leaped astride Ike Shane's big black and sent the beast roaring across the plain. It took him twenty minutes to reach the little Lazy K outfit, owned by old Jim Turner.

Swiftly he told the grizzled little rancher what had happened. The oldster spat out a curse, buckled on his guns and scampered to saddle his horse.

"I'll spread the word," he yelled as Pike thundered away. "In two hours I'll have fifty fightin' hellions in Brimstone. . . ."

Turner's words were lost in a wild roar of hoofs as Pike Cassidy rode away. He rode recklessly, face grim-set, and twenty minutes later he pulled up before a second log-cabin ranch house. A few terse words to a tow-headed young fellow, who buckled on his guns without a word, and he was away again.

Within an hour a dozen men were riding in as many directions, sounding a clarion call for action. . . .

But Pike's burning impatience wouldn't let him wait for the gathering of the Basin ranchers. Billy Peters, he knew, was in deadly danger. Buck Flame wouldn't hesitate to carry out his threats of torture and death if his terms were not met.

Darkness had settled as he rode into Brimstone. He rode slowly along the rutted street, without effort at secrecy. Brimstone's shacks and false-fronted buildings blazed with lights; they echoed with ribald shouts and the thud of boots as the town started another night of drunken revelry.

Pike Cassidy dismounted at a rack in front of the Green Snake saloon. The Green Snake, an imposing, two-story building, roared and teemed with life. Pike slid into an alley alongside the building, to an uncovered window, and peered into the big bar-room.

A pimply-faced youth banged discordantly on a piano. Strutting, gun-belted men whirled tired-eyed, overpainted girls about the room to the harsh music. Other hard-faced hombres lined the bar, drinking the bad whiskey shoved out by the fat barkeep. Buck Flame's gunnies, Pike noticed, with only a few exceptions.

Buck Flame himself stood at one end of the bar, drinking a special brand of whiskey, talking to a fat, scar-faced gent. The gun-boss of Brimstone

seemed in a pleasant humor as he laughed uproariously at something the scar-faced hombre had said.

Sight of that sneering, arrogant face sent cold rage rushing over Pike Cassidy. It sent memories rushing through his mind—memories of stolen cattle, a smoking ranch house, of age-long, torturous hours staked helplessly under a broiling sun.

He left the window, went to the front, lunged between the batwing doors. He knew he was doing a wild, crazy thing, but recklessness drove him on. Walking stiff-legged, he threaded his way through the reeling dancers toward the bar. In that swirling throng, nobody noticed him. He paused at Buck Flame's back.

Then a voice yelled, "Pike Cassidy, by—! Look out, Buck!"

Buck Flame whirled, but he was too late. A gun was in Pike's hand, and it's muzzle was jabbing against Flame's spine.

TIGHT-LIPPED, Pike Cassidy said, "One move, Flame, and I'll blow yore black heart out! That goes for yore gunnies, too. They can get me, all right, but you'll die before I do. Better tell 'em to be good!"

Flame's dark features had gone pasty. Quick fear leaped into his cougar eyes as he looked at Pike Cassidy.

"Leave yore guns alone, boys," he intoned. "This fool's gone loco. Cassidy, what yuh mean—"

"Shut up!" Pike spat. "And lead out, to wherever yuh've got Billy Peters. Git—and yuh'd better walk straight!"

Flame licked his stiff lips. Then he turned, fear and rage battling in his eyes, and walked toward a stairway at the back of the room that wound upward to the second story. Pike Cassidy walked close behind, eyes straight ahead, the gun-muzzle boring into Flame's back, his own flesh crawling with the expectancy of lead in his back.

They gained the stairhead, a babble of excited voices rising from the room below. And Buck Flame, prompted by the gun in his back, went along a shadowy corridor and paused at a closed door. Flame fumbled for a key, unlocked the door, and they went inside.

"Pike Cassidy, by jeepers!" said a glad, familiar voice. "I knowed yuh'd get loose and bust this lousy place wide open!"

Trussed with ropes, Billy Peters lay on the floor of the room, which was bare except for a rickety table which held a guttering lamp. Billy's clothes were torn, and on one side of his freckled face was an ugly bruise.

Pike backed across the room to the boy. "Yuh all right, button?" he asked anxiously. "I'll have yuh loose in a jiffy."

He stooped—and Billy's shrill voice beat in his ears:

"Pike, look out for Flame!"

For Buck Flame, taking advantage of that brief relaxing of vigilance, was hurtling like a mad grizzly across the room. His back half turned, Pike whirled, jerked trigger. But his boot-heel caught in a piece of rope, and he almost fell, the shot going wild. Then Buck Flame was upon him, flung his mighty arms about Pike's body, tripped him.

Locked, they rolled over and over, mauling, clawing, gouging. Pike had dropped the gun, and there was no time to retrieve it. He fought silently, desperately, knowing that noise of the fight would be a signal to bring Flame's wolf pack howling up the stairs. Then they were on their feet, reeling about the room in titanic combat, driving to each other's faces with savage, jarring blows.

And, even as he reeled under sledge-hammer blows, a fierce thrill of triumph lanced through Pike Cassidy.

For all at once a new sound had broken roaringly over Brimstone. A gunshot thundered out. There was a wild clatter of hoofs in the street below. A chorus of yells welled through the night—wild, savage yells, carrying a wolfish timbre. A honkytonk girl screamed shrilly, and a Brimstone gunman's voice, high with sudden terror, cried out.

"It's the ranchers! Grab yore guns, men . . . !"

Then a wild, thunderous crash of gunfire!

Buck Flame, sensing his doom in that wild outburst below, again leaped in and flung his arms about Pike Cassidy. Staggering crazily about the room, they crashed into the table. The lamp slithered to the floor, winked out. The fighters tripped over the table, rolled to the floor. In utter darkness they fought fiercely.

BUCK FLAME wasn't trying to escape now. He was fighting to kill the man who had brought this ruin upon him. Whimpering, savage noises in his thick throat, he fought with the fury of a wild beast, and with all the foul, treacherous tricks he knew.

And Pike Cassidy fought back the same way, hate and anger blowing like a hot wind through his heart. His powerful fingers groped for Flame's corded throat. Found it, and clung grimly. . . .

Below, Buck Flame's leaderless gunnies were on the run. Taken by complete surprise by the blazing holocaust of gunfire that had burst suddenly over Brimstone, panic seized them. But some of them, cornered, had to fight. Guns snarled and boomed, and a pall of gunsmoke rolled over Brimstone.

Mounted and afoot, the vengeance-seeking r a n c h e r s scattered among Brimstone's shacks with blazing guns. Glass shattered. The screams of painted honkytonk girls rose above the din. Men lay in the dusty, trampled street, and others fought hand-to-hand over them. Red tongues of flame licked from a frame building, casting a weird glow over the barbaric scene.

And still the battle raged. Buck Flame had shown no mercy toward those he had trampled under iron heels. Now, with the tide turned, the ranchers were offering no quarter. . . .

Slowly Pike Cassidy got to his feet. He was battered, weak from the terrible struggle. His knees threatened to buckle as he went toward the spot where but a moment ago he had heard Billy Peters' bitter, helpless sobbing as he tried to break his bonds.

"That—that you, Pike?" he heard the kid whisper fearfully.

"Me, all right, button," Pike said. "Just hang and rattle—"

Boot heels thudded along the corridor outside. Light speared into the room. Then Old Jim Turner stood in the doorway, a torch in one hand and a gun in the other.

"Pike, yuh all right?" he asked anxiously. "You and the kid?"

Pike Cassidy swayed unsteadily, looking down at Buck Flame who was sprawled grotesquely on the floor, his dark dreams of a gunsmoke empire at an end. He listened to the racketing gunfire that was slowly dying among Brimstone's shacks, signaling victory for the cowmen.

He knew that with Buck Flame dead peace and prosperity would return to the Basin. The Brimstone ranchers, including himself, would regain their lost ranches and cattle.

"Sure, we're all right," grinned Billy Peters, pride in his wide eyes as he looked at Pike. "Everything's gonna be dandy now!"

And Pike Cassidy knew that that was true. . . .

The End

Gold Bounty for Gunfighters

By RUSS TALBERT

Author of "Chico Kid Sits In," etc.

No run-of-the-mill owlhooter, this Scotty Shawn . . . Scotty Shawn was a legend, a star-packer's signpost to boothill, a gun-hung hellion slated for purgatory's pay-day!

THE unexpected appearance of Scotty Shawn in the doorway of Ignacio Bartolo's *cantina* caused a ripple of excitement that stirred the lounging *vaqueros* along the bar and the players at the gaming tables on the opposite side of the room. Juanita Bartolo, Ignacio's scintillating daughter who was dealing faro opposite that dizzy *Americano,* Chet Ryan, glanced up and seemed instantly to sense the strange net of circumstance that was drawing closely about her because the pupils of her eyes narrowed to pinpoints and her crimsoned lips tightened.

Chet Ryan felt the electric tingle of the tension that gripped the room as he leaned back in his chair and through narrowed eyes watched that sandy thatched stormy petrel of the border country stride carelessly into the room.

"Scotty Shawn!" whispered a line-rider from the north in Ryan's ear, and the tone the speaker used spoke volumes as if he realized that almost anything could—and probably would—happen within the next few minutes.

Scotty Shawn was not only on the dodge with a heavy price upon his head. He was an institution—out on the *mesas* in the wild pear wastes where life was a matter of touch and go, and men were judged solely by their ability to

survive. The son of an Irish soldier of fortune who had won and wed old Manuel Cardenas' daughter, educated at Yale, his estates confiscated because of his part in the recent Zaporta coup, he was both **feared** and worshipped throughout Sonora. Serenely, coolly, he followed his spectacular bent, sometimes turning to strike an enemy, then laughing and riding into the blue distances.

Carelessly he strode into the *cantina*, his two heavy, black-handled guns swinging low and strapped to his thighs with rawhide thongs. And it was those ready guns that kept furtive hands away from the hilts of hidden knives. Two thousand pesos were a temptation!

Chet Ryan nonchalantly arose to his feet and hooked his thumb over his belt when he saw that Scotty Shawn was coming straight toward him. Arrogantly the carrot-topped outlaw pushed Chet aside, and smiled at Juanita across the table.

Some of the vivid coloring faded from the girl's cheeks for she knew that beneath those two men yawned death. A split-second would bring the staccato crash of guns that never missed. The steel-nerved Chet Ryan swallowed no insults and Scotty Shawn—was Scotty Shawn! It was an instant in which the very room seemed to hold its breath.

In that split-second a sleepy-eyed dealer slipped into Juanita's seat, and she faded into the background. Chet felt his veins chill with that deadly coolness that had always preceded gunplay. With his left hand he whirled Shawn about until they stood face to face, and then he struck for his gun. What followed in that history-making instant has been retold about a thousand campfires on starry border nights.

NOT a muscle did Shawn seem to move save a lightning sweep of his right arm, and it was so fast that eye failed to follow it. Before Chet's gun left his holster he found himself staring into the ugly barrel of Scotty Shawn's forty-five. With a grunt of surrender he let his hand drop.

"Your pot, Shawn!" he declared with a grin.

Shawn laughed boisterously.

"Why, hello, Chet Ryan!" he cried, thrusting out his hand. "I've always wanted to meet you. You've been pointed out to me several times, but I've never had a chance to shake your hand. I should have recognized you when I came in, but I expect that I was slightly blinded by that resplendent goddess of chance who has just left the faro layout. She's the lodestar that has been bringing me here, and I'm announcing here and now that I'm here to play her game from soda to hock—with a *padre* to close the deal."

"It is generally known that you gravitate toward trouble plumb easy," observed Chet, taking a liking for the sardonic firebrand in spite of himself.

"My penchant," admitted Shawn with a shrug. "Still it seems to me that she might brighten dull, weary hours in my camp in the Murmuring Hills—give it the feminine touch, so to speak."

"Good Lord!" ejaculated Chet. "If it's the quiet, domestic life that you want, why don't you rope a couple of cougars, tie their tails together an' rock 'em to sleep at night."

With a crooked grin, a shrug, and a wave of his hand Scotty Shawn turned toward the dealer, drawing from his pocket a buckskin poke of raw gold that brought a glint of greed and avarice in every eye about the table.

Chet moved over beside him.

"Unless I've lost my ability to read sign," he chuckled, "you're goin' to need a guardian. I must say that you're a bit impulsive even in this hair-trigger country. I'm backin' a hunch that you're slated for hell's pay-day, an' I'm

figgerin' on stringin' along."

Shawn measured Ryan from head to foot with a merry eye.

"Your curves are mostly angles," he declared judiciously.

"Meanin' which?"

"That as Dan Cupid you're all off. But I welcome your enlistment in my amorous cause."

A moment later Juanita Bartolo returned and perched herself upon the lookout seat. She showed a healthy interest in the raw gold that Shawn exchanged for chips, and then she settled down to the business of the game. For a time it appeared that Shawn would dint the Bartolo bank, but at last the tide of luck turned and at the end of an hour the buckskin sack was empty. A nine-jack combination cleaned him and Juanita arose to her feet with a stifled yawn. Scotty Shawn was beside her instantly.

"Permit me, *Señorita,*" he said in a tone that was not to be denied.

She tossed her head in indifference, but the smile she flashed at him was dazzling. More than one young *caballero* in the room lightly fingered his knife. As the two vanished into the darkness in the direction of the Bartolo *hacienda,* the echo of Scotty Shawn's gay laugh floated back into the cantina and strangely silenced it.

For the next three days Shawn haunted Ignacio's gaming tables, and Juanita, at heart an irrevocable flirt, sidestepped all his advances so adroitly that he made little progress. It was plain, however, that she was interested, and deeply. And behind Scotty Shawn's laughing eyes a new and softer light gleamed when he was looking at her.

There came a night when Shawn decided to pay a formal call at her home—a Sunday evening it was—and he sought out Chet.

"Dig up your sartorial splendor," he suggested gently. "Tonight we a-wooing go. Perhaps I'll let Juanita smile upon you."

"Listen, Scotty," pleaded Chet earnestly, "I know that nothin' I say now will stop you, but I want you to listen to my proposition just the same. We're cookin' up a nice little revolution down in Sinaloa. You've heard about it, of course. Maybe it won't be as exciting as Juanita, but it'll be a damn sight more profitable. What do you say?"

"Affairs of the heart come first you know," said Shawn airily. "The revolution won't break until about September anyway."

"What's the use?" shrugged Chet.

THAT evening the found *Señora* Bartolo and Juanita seated under the bougainvillea in the *patio* for the night was warm, and along the opposite wall in the half-light lounged a half-dozen young *caballeros* in starched white breeches and velvet jackets, each smoking cornhusk cigarets and saying little. One of them strummed on a guitar. With extreme politeness they came to their feet when Shawn and Ryan arrived, and the newcomers returned the bows with exaggerated politeness before taking seats beside Juanita.

If those youthful *caballeros* expected Shawn to follow their traditionally slow tactics they missed their guess. He believed in more direct methods. The devil sported in his eye as he surveyed that line of youthful suitors across the *patio.* One of them—he who was strumming the guitar—was leaning back against the wall with his chair tilted. Shawn casually arose and just as casually hooked his boot under the leg of that chair and sent that young blade sprawling upon the floor.

Unanimous and strong oaths escaped his companions as they sprang to their feet. Shawn had picked out the son of the *jefe politico* and upon him had heaped an unforgiveable insult, which

would only be atoned for in one way. That youth leaped to his feet and a jeweled knife flashed in the dim lights.

Shawn's gun, traveling like a light beam, was pressed against that *caballero's* belt and he wilted in complete terror. Without a word he and his companions marched out of the *patio* with military precision, their backs as stiff as ramrods. Shawn laughed in mirthless staccato, and that laugh served to speed the departing guests until their retreat became a rout.

At careless ease Scotty Shawn stood watching them until they had disappeared into the darkness, and then he returned and drew his chair close beside that in which Juanita primly sat. And before he and Chet had departed that evening Juanita had lost much of her pretended indifference and, like the gorgeous black moth of Coahuila, was playing with the searing flame.

For a week this was the nightly program for Shawn and Chet, and then one morning shortly after daybreak the former came into Chet's room.

"Chet," he drawled softly, a grin playing about the corners of his mouth, "you volunteered once to help me, and I'm calling on you to make good. You're the kind of a *hombre* a man needs in a tight spot, and I'm inviting you to go back into the hills with me. I've located pay-dirt that ought to turn out mighty sweet, and I'm offering to split with you two ways from the jack. But in the meantime I'm planning a modern version of the stunt that was staged by 'young Lochinvar who rode out of the west,' and I need a best-man, a hoss-wrangler, and a rear-guard all rolled in one. You qualify."

"Just when are you plannin' to start all of this—this *fandango?*" queried Chet, pulling on his pants.

"*Pronto*—or sooner! The *padre* is waiting, and everything is all set for the hymnal bonds of connubial discord to be tied up into a Gordian knot. We've only to kidnap the bride, stand off a mob of her rescuers, and escape into the hills."

"Is that all?" queried Chet with deep sarcasm. "Of course I don't mind doin' a little favor like that for a friend." Then he grew sober. "I'm helpin' you, but I'm statin' here and now that never in all my life have I seen a locoed *hombre* so wolfishly hungry for unalloyed trouble. Can you give me a single reason whyfor you want to marry a woman who has got the characteristics of a tiger?"

SHAWN'S smile was inscrutable. "Ulysses, Mark Antony, and Murat, and perhaps a few other illustrious old-timers might answer that question better than I. My explanation would be that Calypso, Cleopatra, and Charlotte Corday are reincarnated in Juanita, and she is therefore irresistible."

"You think you can keep her later, Scotty?"

"I spent a season in the Great Arctic Barrens, and I trained a team of wolf-dogs—three quarter wolves," he replied succinctly. "The only master they knew was fear."

"Yeah!" jeered Chet. "An' the first time you looked the other way they were at your throat."

"The price of carelessness."

For a long minute they were both silent, Chet staring unseeingly at the purpling mountains in the distance. Then he turned to Shawn and placed a hand upon his arm.

"Fightin' fire with fire, eh?" he chanced softly.

"Meaning just what?" Shawn grew rigid under Chet's touch.

"I mean that you're tryin' to forget another woman—figgerin' on usin' diff'rent tactics this time."

"There is no other woman—now."

His grin was enigmatical. "Juanita interests me. I want a woman of ice and fire—steel and silk—luxury and danger. Can you *savvy* that?"

"You're gettin' it in concentrated doses." Ryan shrugged his shoulders. "All right! I'll string along while you need me, an' the luck o' the Irish, because God knows you'll need it."

It was Ryan's duty to have three horses waiting in a ravine in the rear of the ancient mission, and then to be present as a witness to the ceremony. The wiry ponies of Shawn's selection he hitched in a clump of wild pear, and then he headed for the rendezvous in search of Shawn who had been delayed. Glancing out in the direction of Bartolo *hacienda* he saw Scotty Shawn and Juanita standing near the corrals.

It was apparent that Scotty Shawn was losing ground in the argument, and suddenly he stooped and caught her in his arms. She uttered one cry before he placed his hand over her mouth, and the next instant he was running swiftly across the field toward the mission. A startled peon looked up from his work in a pepper field, and fled hastily toward the *hacienda* to give the alarm.

Chet met Scotty before the door of the old church and a minute later they were hurrying down the aisle toward the dimly lighted altar. The *Padre* stood waiting, but evidently Scotty Shawn had not prepared him for such a violent wedding. The old priest swiftly backed through the draperies behind him and vanished from sight. Chet shot forward and pounced upon him before he could reach the rear exit.

At the *Americano's* barked command the *padre* trembled and then obeyed hesitantly. At the altar he lost no time in murmuring the marriage rites and in closing that ceremony because it was quite apparent that he was in deadly fear, and his anxiety to follow Chet's commands to conduct them through the rear exit was pitiful.

Juanita was strangely silent as they dashed through the old, old cemetery toward the waiting horses. Without protest she permitted Shawn to toss her bodily into the saddle.

"Full speed ahead!" ordered Scotty Shawn succinctly. "From the looks of things hell's going to be poppin' white hot in a few minutes."

Skirting the wild pear thicket they broke into a gallop, and Shawn retained a firm grasp upon the bridle of Juanita's mount. A quarter of a mile away, about the corrals of the Bartolo *hacienda,* a posse of perhaps a dozen *vaqueros* were getting into motion. They rode in a compact knot with Ignacio's rotund figure in the lead. Shots were fired by the pursuers, but to them Chet and Shawn paid no attention. No bullets would come close because of the girl.

AFTER some twenty minutes of hard riding it appeared as if the *vaqueros* might overtake them, and Chet saw to it that his two guns were loosed for action. Then Shawn's sagacity and foresight in selecting cayuses for endurance rather than speed began to assert itself, and after another five miles the trio circled a looming butte and the posse was lost.

The star-flecked mantle of night was thrown across the heavens when they at last reached Shawn's cabin deep back in the unbroken silences of the Murmuring Hills. As best Chet was able to determine in the uncertain light, Juanita's new *hacienda* was a one-room shelter of brush and stones with a tarp-covered kitchen and lean-to in the rear, crudely furnished and lacking many of the comforts to which she was accustomed.

Shawn and Chet prepared a hasty and frugal supper, and later the bridegroom produced a bottle of really fine wine, but despite his efforts at gaiety,

Juanita remained silent and brooding. At last she gave up the pretense of eating and withdrew into the cabin, drawing the blanketed door behind her. For an endless hour Scotty sat smoking cigaret after cigaret, occasionally whistling a doleful Spanish love song. Chet shivered although the night was warm for he sensed the approach of poignant drama. A deathly stillness settled over the hills as if a great and unreasoning fear had throttled all nature.

"Good Lord!" ejaculated Chet when he could stand it no longer. "Doesn't it drive you crazy up here? For pure loneliness this place has got Death Valley skinned to a flag-stop."

"There is something about these hills," admitted Scotty softly, "that brings the fear of the unknown. In a week from now you'll be listening—listening—listening at the very murmurings of hell and you'll know all the time that it is nothing but imagination."

"Then why do you stay here?"

"I'll show you the reason in the morning."

Without another word he unrolled a pack in the kitchen and brought out a couple of blankets. He tossed one to Chet, rolled himself in the other and was quickly asleep beside the fire. For a long time Chet lay awake—listening—listening—listening for the sounds that he could not understand, and then at last he slept.

As the gray dawn warmed into vivid tints Shawn called Ryan and led him down the slope below the corrals where he pointed out a shaft which he had driven to a depth of twenty-five or thirty feet. The quartz, scattered all about the place, looked promising to Chet's experienced eye.

"I traced the lead from the dry-wash down there," explained Scotty. "That's where I got that dust I had with me in Concho. The outcrop is difficult of approach on the face of that cliff so I sunk a shaft here. At thirty-four feet we cross-cut, and I've an idea we'll make history when we do."

For the next few days Juanita stayed inside the cabin, preparing her own meals and holding herself aloof from Shawn and Chet. Spending every daylight hour in the shaft Shawn let her have her own way without the slightest interference, evidently convinced that sheer loneliness would drive her to him at long last. It was forty miles to the nearest *hacienda*, and the horses could not be caught without a riata which facts gave him a sense of complete security as far as her escape was concerned.

Chet, as the shaft deepened, was consumed with the fever of gold madness. Twelve hours daily he labored at the herculean task, and at night he and Shawn were too tired for anything but to eat and fall into the sleep of exhaustion. Late one afternoon, almost a week after their arrival, they found the first definite traces of gold. Shawn in his elation carried a piece of the quartz to Juanita. It was flecked with free gold.

A GLEAM of interest shot into her eyes, and from that instant she seemed to undergo a great change in her attitude toward Shawn. Chet, surreptitiously watching her, knew that the light which shone in her eyes was that of avarice and cupidity, but apparently Shawn thought otherwise. And Shawn's harsh and ironic bitterness also vanished, and the metallic glints faded from his eyes. He had seemingly forgotten his Great Barren wolf-dog tactics.

On more than one occasion Chet was gripped by the impulse to warn Shawn against trusting her too far—that she was playing him for the gold—but each time he had remained silent. It was Shawn's business and his alone, and he would not brook interference. Juanita

quite unexpectedly took over the duties of the kitchen, and Shawn, although he said nothing, was visibly pleased.

When they reached the thirty-four foot level, according to Shawn's calculations, they started cross-cutting, but almost immediately all traces of the gold-bearing ore vanished. It looked as if they had drawn a blank. Of the two Chet was the more disappointed. Shawn laughed. Fate had merely played another joke!

Chet was all for heading south and plunging into that Sinaloa affair, but Shawn insisted on sinking the shaft a few feet deeper.

"It's a fault in the stratum," he argued. "The stuff's bound to be here."

Once again they started that daily exhaustive grind. Juanita soon proved Chet's every suspicion as to her motives. She sullenly withdrew into the cabin, and Shawn sought an explanation. He got it—in pointed and certain terms which Chet happened to overhear. It was the first time she had given expression to the venom of her hate for him, and Shawn laughed his old, hard staccato. After that Chet saw to it that neither he nor Scotty left a knife or gun lying around loose about the cabin.

The following day a stranger came into the camp, and by all the laws of the hill country they could not turn him away although Chet strongly advised it, for he was wise in the ways of the "Land of Manana." The newcomer was a rancher from the south, Señor Felipe De Mendez, and even though he had been lost and wandering in the hills for three days he was still spick-and-span in silk shirt, velvet jacket and pants with huge silver buttons.

He was famished and Juanita took him under her sole care while Shawn and Chet went on back to their work. Young Mendez was not unknown to Chet although it was the first time he had ever met him. Cowmen and rangers along the border believed that Felipe and his father, the old Don, were connected with the smuggling of Chinese across the line into Arizona, but proof was lacking. Of one thing Chet was certain, and that was that Shawn was headed for a quick disillusionment.

But Shawn either blinded himself to the obvious or was so absorbed in uncovering the pay-streak that he failed to notice the mounting flames of infatuation before his very eyes. Juanita nursed Felipe as tenderly as if he had been a baby, and he made the most of his opportunity. He lingered at the camp, even after he had recovered sufficiently to ride. Having an extra mouth to feed resulted in a shortage of supplies, and Chet volunteered to ride to the nearest town.

JUANITA made out a list of the things that she would need, and she talked and laughed feverishly while Chet was getting ready for the start. Her enforced gaiety struck the latter as unusual, and he thought once more of giving Shawn a warning, but the latter was in the bottom of the shaft tamping in a heavy charge of dynamite. Besides, Shawn was generally well able to take care of himself.

It was late in the afternoon of the following day before Chet was able to get back with the supplies. He dismounted before the cabin, shouldered the sack, and stepped over the threshold. There he froze to rigidity.

Scotty Shawn was standing in the center of the room, his eyes burning with saffron flames, and his face a perfect delineation of hate and fury. In his every look, his every movement, even in his very bearing, there was the threat of instant and livid death. Juanita stood near him, stark fear stamped upon her pallid face.

Shawn had a rawhide riata in his

hands and he was cutting it into lengths of eight or ten feet each. Juanita's eyes followed the movements of his hands, and the sheer terror in her eyes showed that she understood his strange actions. Just behind her, crumpled against the wall, lay young Mendez.

Juanita saw Chet in the doorway and uttered a low cry of relief. She started toward him, but Shawn blocked her way.

"Stand back, Chet!" he ordered, and Chet dared not disobey.

Roughly he caught Juanita's hands and twisted them behind her back, tying her wrists securely with a length of the rope. Then he bound her feet in a similar manner. Chet strode forward and dropped his hand upon Shawn's shoulder.

"You can't do that, Scotty," he said softly.

"The hell I can't. Watch me!" The laugh that echoed in that room was bleak and mirthless.

"What are you plannin' to do?" demanded Ryan. "Why don't you give her a chance—?"

"Chance?" He glared at Ryan. "I'm giving her the same kind of a chance she gave an hour ago. Listen, Chet! I'm going to tell you something that would make the Apache tortures feel like the caress of an angel. I never had any too much confidence in her kind, but I never knew that the human heart, behind such a face, could harbor that much savagery."

His face was chiseled marble as he glanced at her.

"I believe I told you that she would be at your throat the minute your back was turned," murmured Chet, but if Scotty Shawn heard him he gave no indication of it.

"She did it with those hands—those hands which have touched me with tenderness. Bah! I believe that I could have forgiven anything but what she did. For a few minutes today I lived through an endless hell. Listen!

"Yesterday I tamped in almost half a case of dynamite in those four holes in the shaft, but I decided to wait until today before shooting since I would need help in clearing the shaft. Today I went down to light the fuses and she and that—thing—were handling the windlass." His glance flicked briefly and contemptuously toward the recumbent form on the floor. "I made the fuses sufficiently long to give me ample time to get out of the shaft, and then I lighted them and stepped into the bucket. They wound me up the shaft until I was about halfway to the top and there the bucket stopped. I glanced up and saw something that brought my heart into my throat.

"A hand was reaching out over the top of the shaft, and in that hand was a long, thin-bladed knife. I recognized the hand that held the haft. *It was hers.*" His teeth clicked, and his jaw muscles corded. "That knife bit into the rope, severing most of the strands, but before I could move the remainder parted and I dropped like a plummet down upon those sputtering fuses that were eating their way toward thirty sticks of dynamite."

Chet shuddered as he stared at Juanita. Every vestige of sympathy for her had fled.

"I was stunned by the fall," continued Shawn mechanically, "and I don't know how long I stood there motionless. I saw those living, writhing fuses at my feet and my senses reeled. The dangling end of that rope was twelve or fourteen feet over my head. When they had turned the crank loose and fled, the rope had unwound its length. I made one desperate leap after another for the end of that rope, but I failed by a foot or more despite my almost superhuman efforts. I even tried to climb the sheer face of the wall only to drop sickeningly

back at each attempt.

"The fuses were within six inches of the tamped rock when I was stunned by a sudden thought. I should have thought of it at first, but I was in a blue funk and couldn't think. I just reached down and pulled the fuses out of the holes.

"With the danger removed I managed to make niches in the walls which enabled me to climb to the point where I could grasp the rope. When I got here a little while ago I found them making hasty preparations to leave. He pulled a gun, but he lost his nerve and stood staring at me dumbly while I walked across the floor and knocked him down. Then you came."

For once in his life Chet was utterly without words. For what seemed to him an age the tableau held, and then he passed slowly into kitchen and dropped his pack of supplies. When he re-entered the main room of the cabin, Shawn was binding the two victims together with a couple of lengths of the riata, and then, throwing them across his shoulder without seeming effort, he strode out toward the shaft.

Chet followed at a distance, vainly trying to fathom his strange actions. Dropping his burden to the ground, Shawn lowered himself to the bottom of the shaft, using the rope sailor-fashion. At the end of a long quarter of an hour he signalled Chet to hoist him. As Shawn emerged Chet distinctly caught a whiff of burning cloth. And Shawn had left his flannel shirt in the shaft.

Young Mendez had regained consciousness and was staring fixedly at Shawn. The latter without a word caught up the bound pair and carried them to the bucket that had been made from a half-barrel. Juanita was the quicker witted of the two for she understood Shawn's demoniacal purpose. She suddenly went berserk with fury, daring him to do his worst, taunting him with every known invective in the Spanish tongue. When she had finished through sheer exhaustion, young Mendez began to struggle weakly.

"What is it that you will do?" he cried piteously.

Shawn pointed toward the bucket.

"I'm giving you a dose of your own medicine—hoisting you upon your own petard." His voice was the sentence of death. "You are aware of the fact that the dynamite did not explode a while ago. There are some thirty sticks down there and they are attached to a slow-fuse. Sometime between this and dawn those charges will explode. In that interim you and—your paramour—will be suspended as you are to enjoy each other until that spectacular event takes place."

"Por Dios! Not that, *Señor!* Not that!"

"Precisely that."

DESPITE their pleas Scotty Shawn was as adamant as the Murmuring Hills above. He crowded them into the bucket and then lowered them into the shaft until they were perhaps fifteen feet from the mouth. He hitched the rope about a convenient boulder and stepped back. The sounds that came from the shaft were eerie—ghastly.

"Let them stay in the shaft as long as you did an' then we'll pull 'em out," suggested Chet hopefully.

Shawn just looked at him, but in that glance Chet read the inevitable. His face had drained to a dead white, and the fires of hell smouldered in his eyes. Like a caged cougar he strode up and down in front of the cabin for the next hour, his head turned a little to one side as if he were listening to the sounds that might be coming from the shaft.

At last he entered the cabin and again began his endless pacing, mechanically, monotonously. The hours passed like leaden-footed nightmares. Each in-

stant Chet awaited that heavy detonation which he at the long last half-hoped would come to end that terrible suspense.

Midnight came and went and with it no explosion. Chet again sank wearily to his haunches against the wall. It was almost two o'clock when Scotty Shawn suddenly halted in mid-stride, and then wheeled toward the doorway. Chet snatched up a lantern and followed. Together they approached the shaft and Chet extinguished his lantern. A moon was flooding the landscape. All sounds in the shaft had ceased.

Without asking Shawn's permission Chet hoisted out that bucket and its pathetic burden, fearful of bringing to light what he expected. He slit the ropes and young Mendez crouched and attempted to arise. He was gibbering in insane glee at his deliverance, his former arrogant appearance a thing to breed disgust and repugnance.

Juanita's nerves must have been the stronger of the two, but when she attempted to arise she would have dropped had not Chet caught her. She dropped upon a boulder and stared uncertainly about as if unable to understand that life had been given to her. Shawn towered over them.

"Go—damn you—go!" he rasped in a tone that was strange with him. "Don't ever let me see either of you again. You have ten minutes. There are horses in the corrals."

Juanita swayed uncertainly on her feet and then staggered after the swifter moving Mendez. Shawn watched them until their shadowed forms vanished behind the cabin, and then he silently led Ryan away from the shaft. They had taken but a few paces when a detonation shook the very ground underfoot, and shot flame and rock out of the shaft in a lurid column.

A chunk of quartz fell close beside Chet and he picked it up instinctively. He peered at it and then struck a match. It was rotten with free gold.

"We've struck the vein, man!" he cried. "It's rich, Scotty—rich as—man, just look!" He thrust the quartz into Scotty's hand.

Shawn glanced and shrugged his indifference.

"It's all yours, Ryan, if you want it," he said in a flat tone. "I'm headin' for Sinaloa within the hour."

Chet Ryan recoiled in astonishment and sank to a boulder.

"An' what," he murmured softly, "is the answer to that?"

THE END

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Hogan drew from a shoulder holster, but Lomax's weapon spat from his hip

Dave Lomax wasn't a killer, nor did he wear those two Colts empty—Dave Lomax was a cold-eyed cow-waddy who figured a sheepman had the same rights as a cattleman, and he backed the idea with gun-law!

DAVE LOMAX rode south. On the pay roll he had been down as David Keith Lomax, but now he was back on his own again, without responsibilities, astride a good horse and with all the world before him. His lungs expanded to the clean, sweet air of the altitudes; health tingled in him, and to use his own expression, he felt so good his skin 'ud hardly hold him.

The clouds were gathering for sunset and the foothills were full of shadows. Darkness was rising from the plain, and the rosy glow on the bare granite summits of the range was swiftly narrowing. The lace of the mesquite, the close sprigs of the sage, were losing definition. The cool feel of the breath of night was already in the air. Lomax stopped singing, checked his not unwilling roan, and bent his keen gaze south. It was very quiet. A few cicadas were chirping; the mesquite lifted with a faint swish and somewhere close by he caught the hurried rippling of a creek.

"Ten miles yet to Loredo, Rusty, by the lay of the land," he said. " 'Less we sight something inside of a few minutes it's you and me for a range bed and slim rations. Kinder slim pickin's in Loredo, at that. I got all of seventy cents, Rusty. I got my saddle and my guns, I got my blanket roll and my

slicker. I got yore blankets and I got you. I got my clothes, some few cartridges, half a sack of tobacco, three matches an' about six papers.

"Cleaned out, Rusty, cleaned out on four queens and a two-card draw against a one-card draw to a straight flush! Some day we'll go back and collect what's coming to us. Meantime we got to get us a job, soon's we strike Loredo."

The sun was entangled by the glowing vapors, eclipsed, dragged down below a ridge that buttressed out from the main range. The roan mare nickered softly. Dave patted her on the neck.

"All right, old lady, we'll find us that stream and camp. You're tired and mebbe we can find you some grass. Been a long ride. I'm sure hungry enough to kill a rattler and toast it. We're out o' luck, temporarily."

THE wise roan, with her head free, turned instinctively toward scent and sound of water, moving quickly, eager to find grazing before full darkness. Dave rolled one of his few remaining papers and smoked with the philosophy of one who had often made tobacco serve as solace and substitute for a meal.

They broke through a fringe of mesquite, the mare hurrying down a slope. She bent her head eagerly to the hurrying water as Lomax swung off her back and, flat on his stomach, sucked up his own drink.

He straightened six feet of lean and muscular manhood, glancing down the draw where the creek made its swift way to the plain, reaching out for the saddle cinch. Rusty was cropping grass. It was quite dark now, a few stars already shining overhead. Instead of loosening, he tightened up the cinch with a knee against the ribs of the protesting roan, picked up the reins and mounted.

"Lighted window down the draw, Rusty," he announced in apology. "May mean oats and ham and eggs. Sure looks good to me. Move along, old gal; we don't want to be late for supper."

The gleaming oblong of orange guided them until the bottom of the draw widened out and they passed beside a corral with the loom of outhouses showing dimly. Dave was an expert at ranch outfits, day or night, and he sized up the place for the buildings of a comparatively small foothill holding. The light was in one end of a low-ridged loghouse. Another showed as he rode on, in the front of the house, to one side of the door. Sparks danced out of the top of the chimney, looming at the near end of the structure. Lomax reined in the acquiescent Rusty—visualizing a straw bed, hay, oats—and sounded the visiting call of the range!

"Hello, the house!"

A third oblong of orange showed, widening as the door opened. A figure was silhouetted in it. A voice, neither welcoming nor repulsive, gave the regulation countersign.

"Git down thar' an' come in."

Dave Lomax slid from the saddle and flung the reins over the roan mare's neck, advancing to the door and through it. On his right a partition ran from front to back with two doors in it. He had entered a room taking up nearly two-thirds of the house. There was a blazing fire in the open hearth—for mountain nights are chill—there was a stove, with its pipe making its own exit through the rear wall. There were table, chairs and benches, shelves—one with books—two curtained wall cabinets for utensils, a rag rug on the floor, the table set for a meal, two rifles above the mantel, a violin case atop of one of the cabinets, skins here and there on wall and floor—coyote, mountain lion and one bear—trophies of deer and elk.

His quick eyes took in all these as they ranged round. Then they returned to a closer, frank survey of his hosts. An old man sat by the fire in an easy chair with a deerhound at his feet, head on paws, clever eyes surveying the intruder, action checked by his master's hand and voice. The old man seemed crippled from below the waist. He had a grizzly beard and his hair was still grayer—what was left of it to circle the gleaming bald pate—but his shaggy eyebrows were dark, and his eyes still piercing. The nose shot out in a thin, sharp curve. The face held suppressed fierceness extending to the nervous hands clasping the arms of the chair like the talons of an ancient eagle clutching the rock from which it could no longer soar.

The old man's spirit still flamed while the fires of his body smouldered. Lomax sensed the force of it, its chafing at restraint. He liked those fine old eyes, fierce and brave. Unfinished tragedy sat by that fire.

THE second man, the one who had opened the door, was of far different mould. In a black, coarse, swarthy way, he might have been thought handsome by some. He was well built enough; beside Lomax, he looked like club against lance. Beyond doubt he was strong; beyond doubt also he was sullen, inclined to fancy himself, apt at bullying, resentful at the visitor's entry, for some reason. He would have been more surly if he had the right, Lomax imagined, and so set him down as no kin to the old man, without vested right in the house.

The third figure was that of a girl, busy over the stove, so busy that she did not immediately turn as Lomax came in with his "Howdy." He could see that she was young by the slim, firm curves of her body as she deftly handled her cookery. In the light of the overhead lamp her hair showed thick, well-tended coils of lustrous black, her neck was well set and a warm white, like ivory.

Then she turned and Lomax stood staring, bereft of manners, staring into the eyes of a girl whose womanhood, body and spirit, challenged and held his instantly, spoke to all his senses and roused within his own careless soul such an instant, overwhelming emotion that it left him speechless, powerless to move, to do anything but look at her. It seemed minutes before he recovered himself and found his fingers crushing his Stetson to shapelessness, still confused, fearful and rudeness.

Through all this time she had looked at him. He had seen her head go up a little. It had almost been as if she recognized him. While he spoke, his voice seeming far away, as if belonging to someone else, his thoughts raced, brakeless:

"Guess you didn't stare too much. She ain't mad. The young chap's a bit sore but that's because he was figgerin' on the evening to himself. He's beauing her and I don't believe he's got a chance. She's the prettiest girl I ever saw. Pretty ain't the word. Dave, you young fool, she's plumb wonderful. Some temper, too. She'd stay with the game. Daughter to the old bald eagle by the fire. Why, Dave Lomax, she's *the* girl! You didn't think there was one and here you've found her. She's got you thrown and tied. You always were lucky, you riding kid. But she ain't the easy kind. Not she."

What his voice said was:

"Name of Dave Lomax, folks. Rode over from Hornos, making for Loredo. I was figgerin' on cigarettes for supper, and a bunk in the mesquite when I saw your light."

The old man spoke, in resonant, dominant tone. "That's a long ride, stranger. You're welcome. Mitch, show him

where to put his hawss. It'll be needin' grain after that trip. Fifty miles an' nigh all mountain travel. Supper'll be ready time you come back. There's plenty, Doris Ann?"

"Plenty." The girl's voice was full and deep. She looked at Dave Lomax as she spoke and Lomax felt something that tugged at him and thrilled him.

"What a girl!" he said to himself as he followed Mitch. "Voice like a—like a—" He couldn't place his simile and let the comparison slide.

"Name just fits her though," he told himself as he made the mare comfortable while the morose Mitch silently held a lantern. Dave took his blanket roll back into the house with him. He imagined he would be offered bunk room.

Doris Ann was dishing up the supper when they entered. Savory smell of venison and ham made Dave's mouth water and his stomach yearn toward the meal. There were coffee and hot biscuits, condensed milk and choke-cherry preserves with honey for second choice. No one talked much. All were honestly hungry, yet with every needed mouthful Dave Lomax felt the strange sense of exaltation that had enveloped and permeated him at first sight of the girl. He hadn't learned her second name yet, nor the second name of any of the three.

HE kept saying to himself while he was busy with the contents of his plate and cup, "You lucky *hombre*. You've met her. Lord, if you can only get her!"

Yet, far and wide along the range, it had been said that Lomax was ruthless and heartless, that he kissed at will and rode away from arms and lips that would fain have restrained him.

"Lovefree and womanproof," he had boasted to himself of himself. Now this thing got hold of him like a fever, grabbed him and shook him, head to foot, blood tingling in his veins!

He stole another look at the girl. She was looking at him. Her eyes half open, it was hard to tell their color. But he was sure they could blaze. Her mouth was red; it was made for kisses but it could refuse them. It was almost hard. The chin was firm. Hers would be no swift surrender, swept away on a wave of emotion. Lomax had known those victories and accounted them as slight as they were sudden.

She was studying them. Her eyes did not fall in front of his. They were friendly enough—she was interested—but if he didn't measure up to her standard of a man, that was the end of it. The confidence of Lomax, born of the admiration of many, men as well as women, oozed out of the welt seams of his finely leathered boots.

The meal over, he offered to help with the dishes but Mitch interfered, abrogating the office. The girl mended matters with a "You're a guest," seeing a hard glint in Dave Lomax's eye. Instead Dave pushed back the old man's chair—it slid on runners like a sled—to the fire.

He started to roll a cigarette but his host produced a stogie and Dave took it and lit it, standing long and lean, devil-may-care and handsome with his aquiline nose, his crisp reddish-brown hair, gray eyes and tanned skin, long of leg and deep of chest, the fire sending his shadow dancing out into the room.

The girl was noticing him, inclined to admire him, determined not to show it. He saw all that; he was used to it but tonight it thrilled him. It was tied up with a desire on his part to stand well with the girl that he imagined was far greater than her wish to please him. It was novel, exhilarating.

"Why do you wear two guns?" The voice of the old man was challenging, critical. Mitch turned to hear the answer. The girl went on rinsing dishes.

Lomax had been asked that question before.

"It's a habit," he answered easily. "I'm not a killer," he laughed. "But I do a bit of shooting with both hands—born left-handed."

"Ah!" The old man drew out a newspaper from behind him. The *Prairie News*. He found a paragraph.

"David Keith Lomax, not unknown to fame in these parts once more carried off the purse and medal prize for revolver shooting at the Greater Western Rodeo. As a gunsharp, Lomax is a good deal of a wiz. He out-targeted all the fancy shots of the range for three years running. Speaking personally, ye Editor would sure hate to get into a rumpus with Lomax for he draws quick and aims almighty straight. His victory was a popular one."

"That you? When you said yore name was Lomax I thought I'd seen it somewheres."

"That's me. I had one grand time on that purse. Bought me a new saddle and a lot of things to eat and drink. I was stepping high and going fast when I drew four queens round about this time last night. They sure looked good. Even had my medal up on 'em. And a lizard with the face of a Chinaman and the luck of a black cat in a dairy with the door locked, draws one to the middle of a straight flush. That sends me on my way."

Mitch laughed suddenly and nastily.

Lomax did not move his stance but his elbows crooked and his hands curved in, ever so slightly, toward his gun butts while he crouched a little, bending at the hips. He looked something like a wrestler waiting to spring in for a grip; the tense pose of the gun-user, like a coiled spring, like the flexing of a puma for a leap.

Mitch was armed. His swarthy face flushed. The girl caught at his arm.

"Mitch," commanded the old man, "we need another log." Mitch wheeled, and went out. The tense moment had passed. Lomax smiled. He had noticed tiny beads of sweat on Mitch's forehead as he passed under the lamp; he had seen relief rather than defiance on his face. Mitch had looked death in the face for a moment and knew it.

"So I'm broke and looking for a job," Lomax went on, puffing at his stogie. "Hated to look for one in Hornos. Fellow always does. Me and Rusty, that's my roan mare, we sneaked out before sun-up this morning. I heard there was a big ranch or two over this way. Always a better chance of a job on a big ranch than a small one. How about the Broken K—Bartley's outfit?"

Mitch, coming in with logs, stood suddenly stiffened, holding the wood in his arms. The girl whirled round, her face a mask of suspicious fury. Life leaped up into the features of the old man. His eyes flared under the heavy brows.

"You know Bartley?" he demanded. Lomax sensed a situation.

"Never laid eyes on him. Heard he had a big outfit."

"He has, damn him for a cold-blooded robber, a plundering pirate. Curse him for a thief and a friend and maker of thieves! A corrupter of courts! A scoundrel and a despoiler of the fatherless and the widow. A scheming villain who, with the help of false witnesses and his rotten politician pals, has stolen the range piece by piece, and driven out honest landholders. He has stolen the springs and wells and left the grass to burn, the cattle to die of thirst and their owners to starve. Blast him and all whose blood runs with his! Old as I am, if I had the use of my legs, I'd even things yet. I'd—"

His face was congested; he half rose

from his chair, unassisted, then sank back, the fire dying from his eyes, his strong hands changing to trembling things, his face suddenly pinched. The girl ran forward and set a hand on his shoulder tenderly, smoothing his forehead with the other, giving Lomax a strange, searching look before she bent her anxious gaze on the old man.

"Father! Father! It does no good."

"I'm all right, Doris Ann. All right now. You give me some music, Doris Ann. That'll ease me down."

The girl took the violin from the case and held it on her knee, tuning it. Mitch set the log on the fire.

"Sorry I started something," said Lomax. "Had no mind to. Didn't know a darn thing about this Bartley."

"It's all right, Lomax; all right. Don't concern you. If he offers you a job you'll be a fool not to take it. Now, Doris Ann."

THE thin whine of the violin sweetened, deepened, wove into a melody as the girl stood with the firelight on her face, the lamplight on her hair, bowing with supple wrist the instrument snuggled under her chin. It was a medley of old tunes she played, bits from old operas like the Bohemian Girl, Moore's melodies, folk songs. All the anger died away from her father's face; he softly patted time on the arm of his chair. As the girl laid the fiddle down on the table Dave Lomax took it up. He had his accomplishments, and he was not averse to exhibition, especially here.

"You play," she said. It was an essertion rather than question as she noticed the way his long brown fingers took up the violin.

"Just by ear. Don't know one note from another. But I can pick up a tune pretty good. I heard this played by a big bug at the game. Name of Kreisler, down to Albuquerque. Course I don't play it the way he did. He wrote it himself, they told me."

He stood with his back to the fire, head tucked down, eyes hidden. But he gave the girl one provocative glance be- he began.

Lomax, with his excellent ear, his flexible wrist and fingers, could give an excellent imitation of Kreisler's rendition. It was a simple thing, as execution went, and he could handle the fingering with his naturally blessed left hand. Perhaps, too, out of the whimsical nature of the man, he shared some of the inspiration of the great violinist. The emotion it conveyed was a primitive one, common to all men—and women. He played it softly, sweetly, looking at the girl through his long lashes, knowing her conscious of his gaze.

The old man closed his eyes as if asleep, and all the hardness went out of his face as the melody crooned on. It gripped Mitch, and at the same time inspired him with anger. Doris Ann, it bewitched. Her face changed, became the face of a loving, brooding woman. The air seemed to carry words with it; there was no mistaking the import of the gently swinging rhythm.

Dave Lomax finished, drew his bow through to the tip, and laid the violin on the mantel back of him.

"It has some foreign name," he said. "Tell me it means a lullaby."

For a second he held the girl's gaze full and clear. Her eyes glowed softly.

Lomax refused to play again.

"That suited you," he said. "Next might not. I'm like the tenderfoot who hit his first jackrabbit on the run. He was too foxy to try again."

He had got through to the real Doris Ann. For a moment he had played on tremulous heart strings as well as on the strings of the instrument.

"Reckon I'll turn in," he said. "I either go to bed plumb early or plumb

late." He bent for his blanket roll. He had calculated that the girl slept in one of the rooms on the other side of the partition, her father in another. He realized with keen intuition the many intimate things the girl must do for her crippled parent and that she would want to do unhampered and unobserved.

"I'll turn in along with the mare, if you don't mind," he said. "Rather do it. We're pals. I mean it," he cut short the girl's expostulation. "Any chores I can handle?"

She refused, and he went out to the barn where Rusty whinnied at him. Mitch's horse was in the next stall. Lomax cocooned himself in the straw, but he did not attempt to sleep for a while. Presently Mitch came in with a second lantern and saddled up. He led his horse outside and came back with the light, standing in the opening of the stall and holding the lantern so that it shone on Lomax. The latter sat up, arms free. His guns were close beside him on the straw.

"Buenos noches, amigo," he said.

Mitch scowled.

"You kin cut out the *amigo*. I'm no friend of yourn an' don't aim to be. But I'm aimin' to tell you one thing. You've horned in once with yore fiddlin' an' yore sidelooks. An' one time's a-plenty. I'm givin' you warnin'. Ol' man Larkin has the latch open fo' strangers, but that don't give you no excuse fo' comin' back. You may be gay, but don't you git alootin' round here. *Sabe?* Doris Ann is my gal."

DAVE LOMAX raised himself on one elbow, his eyes mocking.

"You sure surprise me," he answered. "But I made one rule about that sort of thing, buddy. I never believe it till the lady tells me herself. *Adios.*" Deliberately he rolled over and affected to sleep. Mitch stood there with an irresolute hand on his gun butt, glaring at the motionless figure. Then he hurried out of the stable, flung himself on his horse and spurred it viciously. Lomax, hearing him gallop away in the dark, chuckled.

"I'll believe it when she tells me," he said softly. "Doris Ann Larkin! That's sure some name, Rusty. I could put that to music." The mare shifted footing in the straw, lowered her neck and snuffed at him. After a little, having located her master, she cautiously let down on her hind quarters, then with a sigh sank over on her side. Three minutes later the two were sound asleep.

The sun had been up and over the hills for half an hour when Lomax, loping into the corral yard, saw Doris Ann toting a pail of water. He was off Rusty before, quick as the mare was, she had halted. He took the pail in his right hand, offering the girl a great bunch of yellow lilies, seven to a stalk, with the other.

"Thought you might like these," he said, and grinned as he watched her face.

"There's only one place where they grow near here. On the edge of the swamp up near the Notch." He nodded. "That's seven miles each way."

"Saw 'em on the way down yesterday. Didn't have any one to get 'em for —then."

They went in together. Larkin greeted him reservedly. The meal was a good one, but Lomax knew there was little money spent on that ranch. Home products prevailed. The girl's dress was faded from many washings.

"You going to try Bartley?" asked his host, displaying no rancor at the mention of the name.

"I ain't over and above anxious to work for a skunk."

"He's no worse than the rest. Only bigger. In with the politicians. Comes close to runnin' 'em. Don't let what I said last night interfere with you gittin'

a job if there's one open." Lomax looked frankly at Larkin as he shook his hand. He was being politely dismissed upon his way. The girl had disappeared; he felt sure it was at the instance of her father. He was their guest; it was not for him to dispute their ways.

"All right, sir. I'll see what offers. I'm thanking you for the accommodations."

CHAPTER II

HE saddled and cinched up Rusty without sight of Doris Ann. He rode off, around a twist of the trail and out of sight of the buildings without looking back. The fresh air gave him and Rusty a surplusage of oxygen that sent the mare curvetting through the sage and cactus of the foothill slopes and brought song to his lips. The obvious disappearance of Doris Ann was as satisfactory as if she had waved a handkerchief in farewell.

He smoked the last of his tobacco when he gave Rusty a drink two miles out of town. In Loredo he made for the general store, knowing it would be the headquarters of information. There was probably a Mexican *cantina* in Loredo, but this would be hidden to all but the initiate. Lomax's seventy cents had to go for other things; he had not time to waste getting a job. At noon he would be hungry, and so would Rusty. As a range rider he was used to foregoing the noonday meal, but he wanted to be sure of a feed for the mare. The seventy cents went for a measure of oats, tobacco and papers.

The hitching rail outside the store was in the sun. Several ponies were anchored there in the full days that would increase until noon had well passed. Lomax took Rusty across street to a shadier spot. A man rode up on a pinto horse. Each recognized the other for range rider and then the newcomer's long and rather serious face crinkled into a smile that was distributed equally about lips and eyes.

"Dave Lomax, ain't it? Say, I saw you shoot over to the Rodeo at Hornos. You sure can sling lead, *hombre*. My name's Mills, Hank Mills. I'm foreman of the Broken K. I never 'lowed to see you here in Loredo."

It was impossible to ignore or fail to return the camaraderie in the hearty greeting of Mills.

"I'm plumb busted. Bedrock broke, and looking for a job."

Mills looked incredulous.

"Las' time I see you you had a roll big enough to choke a Herefo'd bull," he said. "As fo' bein' broke, I'm usually that way myself. Don't happen to be this mo'nin', an' you're sure welcome to any part of it." He held out a wad of crumpled notes.

"Your credit is good in Loredo, I'm tellin' you. An', if you're lookin' for a job, you're hired already. Here's twenty in advance until we settle wages, gosh darn your ornery hide an' stubborn body!"

Dave Lomax laughed and slapped his hand into that of Mills.

"Someone frisk you fo' that roll of yours?" asked Mills with the frankness of the range that means no offense and causes none to the old-timer.

"I was a victim of misplaced confidence, Mills. So I'm huntin' a payroll."

"An' I'm tellin' you you found it. The old man's comin' into town today. Got some business with the bank. I'm meetin' him over to the hotel at ten a.m. We got plenty of time. The old man, he tells me to look out fo' a man who's handy with hawss an' gun, sabe?

They've been runnin' cattle off 'n us lately till he's plumb sore. Nearly canned me, though he sabe's I can't tend my own job an' be night-ridin' all over the ranch. You fit that job like a snake fits its skin. Reckon there'll be a hundred a month in it, mebbe mo', if you press him. You ride over to the hotel with me by-an'-by, an' we'll cinch it. The old man'll be so tickled he'll ask us to lunch. Good grub at the Painted Doll an' swell waitresses. There's one with red hair kin put me in double harness an' do the drivin' herself any time she says the word."

"I DON'T know as I care about working for Bartley, Mills," said Lomax. "I've heard some pretty hard things about him. I ain't over fussy and they may be exaggerating, but—"

"Bartley ain't no worse 'n the rest of 'em. An' I'm tellin' you straight, Lomax, not just because I'd like to have you ridin' fo' the Broken K, that jobs is sca'ce. You can try fo' yourself if you want, but it's so. It's this way about Bartley. He's out fo' himself, first an' foremost, an' you can't blame him. Water ain't over an' above plentiful round here. Some seasons it's scarcer 'n feathers on a snake. Bartley's had disputes about wells. He's won out on all of 'em. Mebbe because he was right; mebbe because he had the best lawyers; mebbe because the courts was kindly disposed toward him. Me, I figgered that it was none of my plate of steak.

"Naturally, he's got enemies. It's one or mo' of them that's ridin' off the steers. Some of 'em 'ud like to shoot him on sight. I reckon Larkin would, if he could walk or ride a hawss. Larkin has a nice herd runnin' on range an' he has wells an' a crick in Cactus Gulch. The crick runs dry one year. Old Man Bartley claims the wells fo' his own stock. He gits an injunction an' he wins the suit. Larkin loses eighty fat three-year-olds; leastwise they was fat while the grass was green. I see 'm, dried up like a horned toad on a card, tongues out, hips through their hides. Died of thirst. Damned shame to waste cattle like that. Bartley offers to buy 'em cheap after he gits that injunction, an' Larkin tells him where to go. Larkin has to sell some fo' a song anyway, but not to Bartley.

"It busts Larkin. It starts his hard luck. His hawss crosses his feet an' rolls down a slide with him. When his daughter finds him he's paralyzed in his legs. Been that way ever since. The gal's a stem-winder, but she ain't got no mo' use for men than a grouse has fo' a weasel. Mitch Hogan hangs around there a bit, but she treats him like he was a stray dorg. Reckon she prays nights fo' Bartley to break his neck. She'd never pick him up an' bring him in six miles like she did her daddy; though how she done that beats me.

"An' there's others sore at Bartley. They tell the worst of it. But Bartley's got the law on his side. An' this chasin' off cattle's got to be stopped. You know that well as I do, Lomax."

"Yep." Lomax spoke briefly and gravely. Cattle running was a bitter offense against which all men who owned steers or hoped to—Lomax was in the later category—must join to stamp out the offenders.

"The old man's been keepin' tabs pretty close. They ain't been sold alive. Mebbe they buried the hides an' sold the meat here in Loredo, but it ain't likely. It ain't been done through any slaughterhouse. It's a mystery an' it's sure got the old man all stirred up. When they run 'em, an' what they do with 'em. I wouldn't wonder but what he'll slap a nice bonus up fo' roundin' up the raiders an' he won't be partickler if they're brought in standin' up, forkin' a saddle or lyin' down. He'll stand back

of any fancy shootin' you may do; he comes nigh runnin' the county."

The mystery of the thing piqued Lomax. There would be the additional spice of danger. The matter of wages or bonus did not bother him. Money to Dave Lomax represented chips with which to sit into the game of Life. Without it one had to look on. Some day he vaguely hoped to own a herd of his own. That hope had crystallized since he had seen Doris Ann Larkin. He owned to this as frankly as he owned to himself that if she knew he was working for the Broken K she would fight hard to smother any feeling she held for him. Such a feeling he knew existed, but he was not afraid of handicaps any more than a spirited horse will dodge a jump.

HE felt certain Mills spoke straight about the scarcity of other jobs. Bartley, in looking out for himself, obeyed the universal law. A steer-stealer was a despicable coyote. The term rustler is synonymous with horse-thief in the cow country.

"I'll go over to the hotel with you," he said. He had small doubt about landing the job. They rode up together on the Painted Doll, to find Bartley of the Broken K in a tilted chair, smoking a cigar. He was a stocky man with a square face and eyes like flint that surveyed Lomax keenly and thoroughly.

Mills volubly explained who and what Lomax was while Bartley sucked at his cigar.

"Been reading about you," the owner of the Broken K said jerkily. "Can you shoot at a man 's well you can a target?"

"Don't know as I've killed any outside of the war," said Lomax. "I've crippled a few, but I aim tol'rable straight, and I don't often get mad enough for manslaughter. My idea is to carry out my job and protect myself together with the interests of the man I'm working for."

"Squeamish, eh?" Bartley's hard eyes showed a sneer.

"I would hardly say that," answered Lomax quietly. "I don't often miss and I've always beat the other fellow to the draw, so far. I get along." He smiled at Bartley, realizing he was being tested.

"I want these rustlers wiped out, Lomax. If you have to kill 'em, there won't be any verdict of manslaughter. I'll look out for you, but I'm not going to have my steers stolen under my nose. Think you can stop it?"

"Do I get to go after it my own way?"

"How are you meaning that?"

"I might night-ride your ranch for a year and not cut trail if they're stealing a few to a time. Other hand, I may, but I figger I'm likely to get a line or so round town here. I've done a few serious things under that name they give me, but folks are apt to think Dave Lomax is a happy-go-lucky sort of a cuss. You hire me and say nothing about it until I want to come on the ranch regular. I'll galoot around and keep my ears up and my eyes open."

Bartley nodded, a light of approval glinting in his eyes.

"I get your idea," he said. "We'll call it a hundred a month and expenses. Bonus of two-hundred-and-fifty if you catch 'em red-handed. Here's a hundred to go on with. It'll cost money to go galooting." He smiled grimly as he handed over the money to Lomax, and supplemented it with one of his cigars to each of them. "You boys have lunch with me; we'll talk it over so you get all we know."

CHAPTER III

WHEN Bartley drove out of town later in his car, preceded by Mills, Dave Lomax was in possession of the names of all

those who had been antagonized by the owner of the Broken K and might be suspected of trying to get even with him by rustling his steers. On the list was Larkin, though Bartley evidently did not consider him as a possibility. Lomax wondered what Bartley would think if he could have heard the old man cursing him. Still, unless Mitch Hogan had been commissioned as avenger for the Larkin interests, they could be dismissed among many others who had been able to show alibis on the occasions of the raids, as Bartley's detective work had proven.

All told, seventy-three fine steers had been taken. These had been cut out and run off in small lots. It is not easy to miss a few steers from a big band that is grazing free in foothill country. Occasionally a rider would report that a steer whose markings had given it individuality was gone, and investigation would show others apparently missing. The late range, though best in the foothill country, was full of folds and wrinkles where checking was difficult and it was not until the fall roundup that the figures had been approximately arrived at. There was no trace of the three score and thirteen, either as live stock or meat; no suspicion of rebranded stock, no sudden increase of herd or wealth. The steers might have vanished into thin air. For two weeks none had been taken, but Bartley did not doubt that the depredations would commence again.

Financially he had been hit for a loss of between five and six thousand dollars, but what stung him more was his damaged prestige. That he, boss of the county, head of the Cattle Association, with a ranch whose working was his pride, should be a matter of jest, rankled deep. No one mentioned it to his face, but he knew they laughed about it in secret and thought it a good joke on Bartley. There had been a stinging paragraph or two in the paper of the neighboring county; it might affect his political standing in the State. He was perfectly willing to spend the price of the steers if he could bring the rustlers not so much to justice, as before his judges—and make an example of them, if they should not happen to be shot or lynched before they got into court.

The advent of Dave Lomax caused a mild rustle in Loredo. It was generally believed that his main purpose in life was the spending of the prize money he had won.

Dave Lomax became a habitué of Miguel's *cantina*. He was often found in a poker game, where he was generally lucky. He made no attempts to beat a straight flush with a lesser hand.

"If he don't quit foolin' someone else will win the shootin' purse an' medal next year." So said the kindest. It was not especially noticed that he never mixed with women, but it was known that he was a steady customer of Miguel. He began to take his meals there; occasionally he slept there. He would sit by the hour in the *cantina* at a little table that came to be known as his, close to a wooden barred window outside of which a vine grew and crawled up the adobe wall.

"Rusty," he told the mare one day, "my stomach's plain ruined with bad food and grease. I've stuffed enchiladas, tortillas, frijoles and chili con carne into me till I hate the sight of 'em. I'm off Mexican grub for life, once I get through with this job."

Day after day found him playing solitaire by his window or greeting all comers. One ace he kept up his sleeve, his knowledge of Spanish and the fluency with which he could speak it on occasion. Most cowmen are apt to interlard their talk with such words and phrases as take their fancy. Lomax suppressed this habit but seemed to

pick up one or two, and his exploitation of them and his simple pride in them raised many a smile.

They did not openly poke fun at him. They were afraid of his guns, and they were never sure of the limits of his abounding good-nature. A man may shift his temper as swiftly as a rattler makes up its mind to strike.

HE learned many things, some when he was seemingly asleep with his head on his arms and the flies buzzing about him, even biting him, while the cronies of Miguel chattered in Mexican, or white men babbled with tongues loosened by *mescal, pulque* or squirrel whiskey.

He tried to make Miguel despise him, but he was not at all sure he had succeeded. That Miguel was an unscrupulous rascal he found out early in the game. That Miguel or one of his crowd did not try to ease him of his roll when he was supposedly asleep kept him cautious and constant in his role.

It was the tenth day after he had taken Bartley's money that he met Doris Ann on the main street. Dave Lomax was shaven and clean on that occasion and he was riding Rusty after leaving the barber shop, another fertile source of gossip.

Doris Ann was on a pinto horse. She was dressed in a divided skirt of brown denim; her waist was tan with a crimson tie, her hat was a Stetson, still smart, though ancient. She passed Lomax close enough for him to have put his hand on the horn of her saddle—and she cut him dead.

A flush of blood that bore joy with it had surged through Dave as he swept off his sombrero. He looked her full in the face and her eyes gazed at him and through him as if he had been made of glass. There was no shade of annoyance, of contempt, even of indifference. She simply did not see him and she left Lomax gray beneath his tan in the receding flood of happiness and expectation, fine hard lines showing about his mouth and nostrils.

He laid that to Mitch Hogan, who sometimes came to Miguel's. It could not be known that he was in the employ of Bartley. Mills would not talk; no one would believe that Bartley was paying a man to act the wastrel. But Hogan had branded him as a profligate.

So far he had not come in contact with Hogan personally. He had fancied Hogan had avoided him. Hogan had a ranch of his own, not overly successful, and tried at night to win what he could not earn by day. That evening Dave maneuvered successfully to get into a poker game with Hogan and devoted his attention to winning the latter's money. He was bitter and his desire was manifest. The game became practically a duel between the two. It was an unequal one. Lomax was the better judge of card values, the better judge of men, the greater master of himself. A final hand, in which Lomax stood pat, saw Hogan throw down his cards with a curse after he had vainly tried to better three tens. As Lomax rose from the table with the winnings he deliberately winked at one of the bystanders and the man, as he expected, turned over the pat hand. It held a pair of eights, a three, a jack and an ace.

There was a roar of laughter and a battery of badinage against the loser.

The Mexicans guffawed louder than the rest, bending over and smiting their thighs with open hands. Ordinarily Lomax would never have prompted such discomfiture of an opponent, but the memory of the slight by Doris Ann had made him bitter. Hogan's temper, none the best, broke through the thin crust of control. He cursed at the laughing crowd and wheeled on Lomax.

"You win on a cheap bluff this time, but you lost out this afternoon, you

poor sucker! After this you won't horn in where you ain't wanted, you greaser toady!"

The room stilled until the drop of a pin could have been heard. Lomax's hands flew to his gun butts automatically, but he jerked them away as if breaking some forcible contact. His words were even, his eyes metallic.

"You used fighting words, Hogan. I'm giving you a chance to take 'em back."

AS he spoke Hogan drew from a shoulder holster, fast as the strike of a snake. The whole room was in action. Those back of the two men made way in a mad scramble to get out of the reach of bullets. Hogan's gun was over his right shoulder, coming down for the trigger pull when Lomax's weapon spat from his hip. The missile struck the cylinder of Hogan's gun and sent it whirling as it exploded, scoring a hit on the ceiling. Hogan's hand was tingling with momentary paralysis; his eyes held fear; his jaw sagged. Lomax replaced his gun in his holster. The muscles bunched in his jaws with the restraint he had put upon himself. To kill Hogan, to wound him, was not part of his program. It was better to humiliate him.

"One of you pick up his gun and take him out with it," he said coldly. A man bent for the pistol; another took Hogan, still subdued by the terror that had gripped him, and hustled him out. He met few friendly looks and many jeering ones. His reference to the Lomax's friendship for Mexican company had not endeared him to the habitués of the *cantina*.

Lomax tossed his winnings on the bar and called up the crowd. An hour later he suddenly swayed as though with dizziness, and Miguel and another man helped him upstairs and laid him down on the bed he sometimes occupied in a room that overlooked the patio of the *cantina*, the window giving to the tiled and vine-covered roof of the arched porch that ran round the four sides of the little courtyard.

He lay there for a while grinning over the collapse he had assumed to get out of the crowd. He had felt a hand relieving him of what cash was left him and he had let it go without challenge. It meant that Miguel now despised him for a weak-kneed gringo. There were things he hoped to get from Miguel, following hints he had already picked up.

The noise in the cantina finally died away. Lomax was wide awake, sleep far removed. He heard someone come out below onto the porch, heard the scrape of chairs on the flags, Miguel's voice, another answering in Spanish, his own name spoken contemptuously. He had taken his boots off and he tiptoed to the open window, sliding carefully half-way out, then down on to a mass of vines that covered the tiles and muffled any noise he might make.

"A drunken fool," said Miguel. "He has come to the end of his money. I am tired of him in the *cantina*. I like not this shooting, José."

Lomax grinned in the darkness. The talk rambled on; the scent of cigars came up to him. Then came the name of Bartley. It appeared that the immunity of the *cantina* from being bothered came by favor of the owner of the Broken K. Just why he should be interested in a rascal like Miguel made Dave curious. He crawled to the very edge of the slanting roof, his ear down toward the spot where Miguel and his crony José sat and smoked. After nearly thirty minutes of what was literally eaves-dropping, Lomax sneaked back into his room again with a smile that did not show in the darkness where he carefully rebuckled on his guns, changed their cartridges and then stole out of his room and down the hall to

the one used by Miguel. A thin streak of light showed under the ill-fitting door; the clink of glasses sounded.

Dave Lomax had not learned anything about the missing steers, but he had gleaned news he thought well worth while. He halted outside the door, his face sternly set. Miguel did not drink while he was serving his customers; he reserved his potations—also his best liquor—for a nightcap with José, his brother-in-law. Senora Miguel was dead.

MIGUEL had his glass lifted when he saw his door open and the figure of Lomax glide into the room. His jaw dropped in astonishment and consternation. The latter deepened when the "drunken gringo" addressed him in excellent Spanish.

"Both of you, gentlemen, raise your hands. So." Lomax removed two knives and a small automatic, the last from Miguel. "Now you may sit down again while we have our talk. Do not fear my guns so long as you talk and tell me the truth, gentlemen. First, how much did you steal from me tonight, Miguel, when you two packed me upstairs?" He fingered the roll he had taken from Miguel's sash.

"Forty-eight dollars."

"That should be about right. Now then, I was on the roof when you talked about the starting of this *cantina* and the protection you have from Senor Bartley. That interests me. Miguel, get me a pen and ink. José, you write down what Miguel is going to tell you. Be nice, boys, both of you. It is well."

Lomax returned to his room later only for his boots and other belongings. It was nearing dawn when he rode Rusty away and out of the town. He cantered toward the foothills while the east grew gray, and then as the sun leaped up, loped back to town, charging his lungs with the fresh, sweet air.

"We're shut of that *cantina,* Rusty," he said. "Me, I'm going to git me a bath and a white man's breakfast down to the hotel. You git the best there is in Loredo to take the taste of Mexican stuff out of your mouth. I'm off *frijoles* for life. My insides are plumb perforated. You and me for the out-of-doors for a bit, Rusty. We'll live in the open till we get aired."

He was eating ham and eggs when Mills found him.

"Been huntin' you fo' an hour," said the foreman. "They cut out five steers las' night, Tyne saw 'em feedin' in a pocket yest-ay afternoon. Now they're gone. An' the Old Man's gone ravin' *loco*. Wants you should quit galootin' an' come out to the ranch right away."

"I'm with you. I was comin' out today, anyhow."

"Learn anything here in town?"

"Learned a heap, but not what I was looking for. Had your grub, Mills? Then come on."

The rider, Tyne, showed Lomax where he had seen the steers grazing the afternoon before. He described their markings. Dave listened and rolled a cigarette, seated on a rock, Rusty grazing.

"What you aimin' to do?" asked Tyne.

"Think." Tyne looked at Lomax, who appeared to have withdrawn within himself and to be totally unconscious that the rider remained close by. Lomax smoked on and out, rolled another, and another.

"Old Man said I was to stay if you need me," Tyne ventured.

"You might let me look at your horse's feet."

Tyne looked on, amazed, while Lomax made his inspection.

"That all?"

"Yep. See you later on, Tyne. *Adios.*"

When the rider had gone Dave Lo-

max began to cast about for trail. He picked it up here and there, confused by the marks of Tyne's search. He worked on foot, Rusty trailing him, nipping here and there as she went, and he worked with infinite patience and skill, reading sign, deducing, using all his range-learned wisdom.

AT last he found scattered, but indisputable, token of what he wanted —the trail of cattle being driven at a trot, the marks of the herding horse. Out of the scraps he reconstructed five steers and a pony; then he mounted the mare. Now he followed the natural contours that cattle would choose under such circumstances. Presently he entered a draw that wound S-wise, deep into the range, out of that into another, and along a maze of ravines and canyons that grew ever rockier and steeper, but where his keen eyes caught casual signs of recent traffic. Yet he lost it at last after an hour's reaching over wash gravel; lost it on ledges of rock that mocked his utmost efforts.

Out of the canyon where the trail vanished there were several possible exits masked by rock ledges that could hold no imprint, however faint. One by one Lomax searched these without avail, night overtaking him while he tackled the third of them. Without even a shrug of his shoulders he resigned himself to what was practically a dry camp, finding a hatful of water for the mare holed in a shallow cave.

"This is sure a fine getaway country," he reflected. "I wouldn't wonder but what they all went out thisaway. I'll make this my hideout. Now they've started in again getting busy they may be along in a night or two. Mills said they repeated two nights running sometimes. We'll see. I'll bring over some grub and water tomorrow early, sleep daytimes and peel my eyes nights. Starting now. You never can tell."

His cave was in the main canyon where he had first lost his marvelously picked up trail, and from which branched out the possible avenues for the rustlers. Only one man had run off the five steers. Dave was sure of that as he sat in the cave mouth, denying himself a cigarette on the bare chance that the run might be repeated and having knowledge of how far the scent of tobacco will drift on a quiet night.

It was still in the canyon, though the high clouds that baffled a moon which rose about midnight showed plenty of wind, a possible change of weather. It smelled a little like rain to Lomax, rain that would wash out any trail he might have found in the morning. He squatted on his haunches ruminating, principally about Doris Ann.

"I'm not through with you yet, Doris Ann," he told himself. "I wonder what Hogan told you? If I'd shot him I'd sure have queered myself. As it is, I've got a sporting chance."

He rose to his feet and glided out of the cave to where the mare was lying down in the shadows, satisfied with the grass he had pulled for her and the oats he had brought from the ranch headquarters. Soundlessly she responded to the pressure of his hand on her withers and down her nose, standing while he noiselessly saddled her, listening for the slight sounds he had caught and known instantly to be foreign to the time and place. The mare quivered; her ears pricked, and she stood like a statue after he had mounted and backed her into blackness between two weathered buttresses of the cliff.

A click of split and horny hoofs on rock, a cling of an unshod hoof against a loose stone.

Two steers, trotting swiftly, looking wildly about them, came up the canyon. The clouds opened and the moon showed the shape of a horse and rider.

"He's modest enough with his two steers," he told himself. Then he touched the mare's flanks and she leaped out. The steers raced away; the horseman reined in.

"Halt," shouted Lomax, reins on the horn, gun in his left hand, his right handling his lariat for action.

THERE came a vicious spat of fire. A bullet sang by his ear. Up swung his gun, down, his finger tightening to the pull. A shaft of moonlight split the darkness. He saw a pinto horse, wheeling to race away, the slight figure of a rider, breeched but — unmistakable. Recognition came even as he instinctively squeezed trigger on his unerring aim, the moon giving him clear vision. The rustler was Doris Ann!

With a supreme agony of will, summoned from the depth of his soul, Lomax checked, ever so slightly, the downward swoop of his gun, wrenching the tendons of his wrist.

The girl's hat flew off but she bent low — unharmed — spurring the stubborn pinto. Lomax breathed a little prayer of thankfulness and then his twisted face, that had relaxed, grew grim again as the mare bounded out beneath his urge in full stride and his lariat went whistling, looping to the mark.

The fighting pinto, maddened at shot and spur, was bucking in its tracks, but it was superb horsemanship that checked the mare and gauged the check of the lasso. He could not save her from a heavy fall, clear of the pinto that went racing off with swinging stirrups, but there was no drag.

He slid from the saddle and ran toward her. She lay stunned by the impact but seemingly unhurt, her black hair streaming about her as the moon fought clear again and showed her white face. Instinctively she had fallen with relaxed muscles, as all good riders do. The lariat was about her arms.

Gazing for a moment after the flying pinto, Lomax saw a spurt of fire from the summit of the cliff. Before the whang of a rifle went reechoing in the confined place, he had flung up his arms and fallen on his back, one leg drawn up, beside the unconscious girl. The mare came over and snuffed at him uneasily. He did not stir.

They were scraping sounds on the face of the cliff where some one felt their way down. A man came out toward the group, carrying a rifle. The moon was besting the clouds, and sailed clear and free in a pool of dark blue sky when Hogan walked up to the body of Dave Lomax. He stood by the right side between it and Doris Ann. His right foot drew back for a vicious kick.

Lomax's right hand shot out and grasped Hogan's left foot as in a vise. He jerked with all his might and Hogan fell, taken off balance. In a second Lomax was on top of him, astride his chest, his knees grinding into Hogan's biceps while he laughed in the snarling, baffled face.

"Played possum on you," he said breathlessly. "Your night shooting is poor. Bad judge of distance. Now get up."

He possessed himself of the rifle and emptied magazine and breech. As Hogan rose sullenly he covered him with a gun and searched him for other cartridges or weapons.

"I got a good right to kill you, Hogan," he said. "You may have been trailing me, or you may have been trying to protect Doris Ann. I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt. But you'll walk back. I'm needing your horse for the lady."

There was a gasp and Doris Ann sat up, looking at them bewilderedly.

"I'm coppering this getaway of yours, Hogan," Lomax went on. "You'll keep your mouth shut about tonight. You've never been here, *sabe?*"

"That's the way you're playin' it, Dave Lomax. You'll keep *yore* mouth shut an' cheat yore boss so you can git into Doris Ann's graces. You'll be good to her if she's good to you? Well, two can play that way. I'll keep my mouth shut if Doris Ann is good to me. If not, I've got the pair of you. You don't dare shoot me in cold blood in front of Doris Ann, an' you know it."

"Oh!" Doris Ann started forward and Dave checked her.

"YOU'RE right there, Hogan. It was account of her I didn't shoot you in the *cantina* when you drew on me. I ain't over and above fond of killing, but I'm going to give you a gosh-awful licking."

It did not last long, the fight in the flickering light with the moon plunging again through the clouds. There was little offensive on Hogan's part and his defense was sadly inadequate before the driving, smashing blows of Lomax. He went down at last, battered and inert, face to the grit.

"Now then," Dave Lomax said grimly to Doris Ann. "We'll go get his horse for you to ride."

"What are you going to do with me?" she asked.

"I'll tell you that when we get where air's a bit purer," he said. "Hogan, if you open your mouth once—about tonight, you'll see me—once—and it'll be through smoke, for I'll come a-shooting and a-shooting straight! You get up on the mare, Doris Ann."

On the top of the cliff, after he had shortened the stirrups of Hogan's mount, the girl repeated her question.

"What are you going to do with me?"

"There was seventy-three steers to date, up to yesterday. Five then and two more tonight. Reckon we can't count them. Tallies pretty close with what your dad lost when Bartley pre-empted the wells, don't it?"

"Yes."

"That was why you took 'em?"

"Yes." There was defiance in her voice but it was faltering.

"What did you do with 'em?"

"I wanted them to die, like ours died. I wanted to drive them over the edge of a cliff. But I couldn't. It was not their fault. They are in a little park at the head of a blind canon. They have eaten nearly all the feed and I didn't know what to do with them. It wasn't the money—"

"That's where you ain't sensible, Doris Ann."

"What do you mean? What are you going to do? Bartley hired you, Hogan says."

"He did. But I ain't working for him now. Not since I nearly shot you, Doris Ann." His voice trembled. It was charged with a tenderness that made the girl look at him strangely. "You and me'll go get those steers. I'll turn them over to Bartley. Law says they're his, you see. He says he's going to make an example of whoever drove 'em off."

She did not flinch, but he heard her mutter, "Dad," before she caught up her lip with her teeth.

"You're going to take me to Bartley?"

"No."

"Then what are you going to do with me? Why don't you tell me?"

"I'm going to do what I can't help doing—love you the rest of my life, Doris Ann. Same as you're going to love me."

"You. Love *you?* I hate you!"

Her voice was charged with emotion. Dave Lomax made no pertinent reply.

"We got to be going. Getting light before long."

When they reached the bed of the canyon again Mitch Hogan had gone.

"I suppose you want your bonus,"

said Bartley, facing Lomax across the desk in the office of the Broken K. "You've delivered the steers, but I'm not satisfied with what you said about the rustler."

"I told you he was dead. And buried. He won't trouble you any more."

"What did you bury him for?"

"A human body's worth better burial than the belly of a mountain lion or a puma, ain't it?"

"Where's he buried?"

"In my own private graveyard, Bartley. The ghost is laid. Don't you go stirring it up. You got back your steers. If that rustler ever bothers you again I give you full and free leave to hang me to the first tree. I don't lie, Bartley, and I plumb hate to have anyone suggest I do. Makes me sore."

They measured eyes across the desk. Finally Bartley nodded.

"I'm taking your word for it then. I'll make you out a check."

Dave Lomax stopped him as his pen touched the paper.

"How much you figger them steers worth?"

"Worth? Why, about five thousand dollars, the way the market is now."

"Then Larkin's steers, that died that time you took the wells, should be about the same figger? Suppose you make out a check to Larkin for five thousand dollars. That'll square me."

"What are you driving at, Lomax?" demanded Bartley.

"I'll tell you," said Lomax, composedly seating himself on the corner of the desk. "Coming down to Loredo I stayed with Larkin. Your name came up. Larkin said considerable about you. Said you were a robber and said something about false witness.

"I HIRED out to you to get back them steers an' break up the rustlers. I've done just that. Outside of that, I happened to pick up a few things down in Miguel's *cantina*. They didn't know I *sabe Espanola*. To tie it short, I find out that Miguel and José witnesses for you in the Larkin matter and does some fancy lying at that. They got the wells for you."

"It's a lie."

"No, it ain't. I persuaded 'em to put it all down in black and white. They'll go into court if they have to. I persuaded 'em it would be healthy for 'em to do that little thing.

"But shucks, why raise a fuss! Larkin's through ranching. His daughter don't like the place. She's going elsewhere. Larkin's going with her. You keep your wells. You keep my bonus. And you make out your check for five thousand, and I'll trade you this confession of Miguel and José. How about it?"

Bartley was a man of quick decisions. He wrote the check and they traded paper.

"What makes you so all-fired stuck on fixing up Larkin?" Bartley asked as Lomax folded up the check.

"It ain't Bartley so much. You see, I'm going to marry Doris Ann."

He went out to the mare while Bartley watched him with the glint in his flinty eyes not entirely that of anger.

"That's what I'm going to do, Rusty," Dave Lomax confided to the mare as they galloped toward the foothills. "She don't know it yet—for sure—but she sure suspects it." The End

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DRAMATIC NOVELETTE OF GUN-TROUBLE ALONG THE BIG SMOKE!

Substitute for a Gunslick

By KENNETH A. FOWLER

Author of "Home Range for Killers," etc.

The Big Smoke was the rawest section of steer country in Arizona, and Jim Trent, gunslick, didn't judge a slim cowgirl the right party to boss the range's toughest cattle outfit!

JIM TRENT stared when Linda Charles came out on the wide veranda of the ranch house and leveled her gray, disconcertingly direct eyes at him.

"You wished to see me?" she asked in a voice that made Trent think of a soft low cello note.

"Why, no, ma'am." He took off a rumpled black Stetson and ran the brim through his fingers while he appraised her from eyes that were like swirls of blue smoke against the smooth burnished bronze of his face. "I was hankerin' to have a talk with the boss of the outfit, ma'am. You see, I—"

"I'm the boss." A faint smile plucked at the delicate curve of her cheek. "What can I do for you?"

"Why—" He stared at her blankly a moment, as if trying to reconcile the statement with the speaker. To Jim Trent, this chit of a girl didn't look like the right party to boss a tough cattle outfit, especially in times like these when this Big Smoke range was the most troubled section of steer country in lower Arizona. He nevertheless noted, with masculine appreciation, how trim she looked in those gray whipcord riding breeches, and how snugly that blue pullover sweater fitted the full

high arch of her bosom. Her hair, too: it was an amazing corn color, and was smoothed back sleekly from her temples to fluff out into crisp short curls behind her ears and at the nape of her neck.

Her slenderness, Trent decided, was deceptive; it was the slenderness of a willow branch, that might bend to the wind, but would never break. On second glance, he even admitted he might have been wrong about her; conceded that she might be fully capable of running this spread. Her chin, he noted, was a bit blunt, probably for stubbornness; her nose faintly tip-up, no doubt indicative of a slight tendency towards combativeness; and those arced red lips, pretty as they undeniably were, could, Trent felt, tighten together inflexibly when occasion demanded.

Well, maybe this would be his chance. Maybe this Bar C, where they were admittedly in need of hands, would be the spot where he could settle down and forget that he was the son of Blackjack Trent, something which ranchers of the Big Smoke range had shown a unanimous disinclination to forget even as they conceded, tolerantly, that he might be honest enough personally and no doubt shouldn't be judged by the misdeeds of another.

But had they given him a chance? They had not. "It might have a bad effect on the men," was the argument they gave him, shunting him on from one spread to the next, where invariably he heard the same argument and got the same answer.

THREE years as a grub-liner, as little more than an out-and-out saddle tramp, does things to a man's character, imperceptibly at first, then more noticeably, like the proverbial wearing away of stone by water. Pushed about, challenged and rebuffed at every twist and turn of the trail, Jim Trent had hardened, had grown gradually embittered against this society of cattle lords who arbitrarily adjudged a man on the basis of his relationship to somebody else and who took only a mild academic interest in his personal probity. When, in fact, word had reached him that the Bar C might be needing hands, only one avenue of escape had seemed open—the owlhoot. And that was the trail he had spent three of the best years of his life fighting to avoid.

But all that was behind him now. That had been yesterday; this was today. And now, as he let his mind turn back in this swift kaleidoscopic flash of remembrance, he forgot he was hungry, forgot he had eaten nothing since the strip of jerky he had gnawed for his breakfast eight hours ago, and felt a sudden resurgence of hope . . . a hope that was somehow personified for him by a pair of soft gray eyes. . . .

"Why yes," the girl was saying in answer to his question, "we do need extra hands here. But it wouldn't exactly be an ordinary cowhand's job."

A puckering grin tightened a corner of Jim Trent's mouth. "Maybe, ma'am," he offered mildly, "I'm not exactly an ordinary cowhand."

She could believe that. There was something distinctly out of the ordinary about this tall, lean-jawed pilgrim with the wind-bitten face and smoky blue eyes. His spare frame suggested hickory-hard muscles, a whipcord pliancy of movement.

The girl smiled, a little tiredly, Trent thought. "We've got just a small spread here," she said, "but we're being squeezed out because we have water and our neighbor hasn't. Link Daggett of the Two Links wants this Bar C range because it has year 'round springs on it, while all he's got are just a few little mudholes that go dry nearly every summer. He's tried every way he knows to drive us out, but up until five

weeks ago it was just by threats and intimidation. Now . . . it's murder."

"Murder!" breathed Jim Trent. "Who—"

The girl's eyes misted. "My—my dad. He was shot by Pete Vega, Daggett's foreman."

To Jim Trent, this seemed one of those times when silence is more expressive than speech. He kept silent and the girl went on in a low, firm voice: "Father was shot when a crew of Daggett's gun hands raided the Bar C and ran off a hundred head of our best stock. There's a buyer waiting at the railhead at Sunoco for the four hundred head we've got left, but if I can't get them there by Saturday it means I lose the Bar C. I've got a note due at the bank that day, and I'm depending on the sale of the cattle to meet the note. It's hopeless trying to get an extension at the bank because Judson Mace, the banker, is working hand in glove with Daggett."

Jim Trent said: "And you're afraid Daggett may try to stop your drive?"

"He'll move heaven and hell to stop it. He knows I've only got four men here, counting my foreman, Hemp Rawlins, and—"

"Five men, ma'am," Trent corrected quietly, "if you're takin' on hands."

Her gray eyes came up to him in frank appraisal. "I couldn't pay you a cent till after the drive," she warned, "and you'd be risking your life."

"*My* life!" Trent chopped out bitterly. "Nobody's ever considered that very important, ma'am."

SHE didn't seem to hear him. Her gaze had shuttled off to the right, towards the whitewashed gate of the corral. A man was coming through the gate, walking towards the ranch house.

"Here comes Hemp Rawlins now," the girl said. "He does all my hiring. You can talk to him."

Hemp Rawlins was short—hardly more than a good five-feet-five—but he had shoulders built for bulldogging and came driving up the gravel pathway to the veranda on legs that operated with the powerful thrust of pistons. He halted abruptly at the foot of the veranda and pulled off his hat.

"Sorry, Miss Linda," he put out hesitantly, "I didn't savvy you was busy."

"It's all right, Hemp, I'm not busy. I suppose you want to see me about the drive."

"Why, yes ma'am, I—"

"We'll need extra help, Hemp. This man's applied for a job."

Hemp Rawlins turned and fixed Jim Trent with a gauging glance.

"Where you from?"

"Why, I haven't been working steady any place, I—"

"Name?"

"Jim Trent." Trent bit off the words savagely. He was through beating around the bush with people. If they didn't like that name, they could plumb go to hell.

The foreman's eyes hardened. "You any kin to Blackjack Trent?"

There it was. The inevitable question. Jim Trent could sense the antagonism in the words, the sharp undercurrent of suspicion. Maybe he'd been a plumb fool, building a house of cards all because a girl with gray eyes and a soft voice had made him forget for a minute, had made him hope. . . .

"Blackjack Trent," Jim Trent said levelly, "is my father. I don't advertise it, but I don't deny it!"

The consternation that showed in Linda Charles' gray eyes hurt more than Hemp Rawlins' curt turndown. "Sorry, Trent," the foreman said bluntly. "We can't use you."

"But Hemp," protested the girl, "we have no right to judge one person by another. This man may be honest, Hemp!"

"Sure," growled Hemp Rawlins, "he *may* be, Miss Linda. But with things like they are now, we can't take chances. You know that." He swept Trent with a cold glance, then deliberately turned his back on him. "Ma'am," he said in a clear, hard voice, "what I came to tell you about as a matter of fact, was Blackjack Trent. There was talk in Saguaro today he was going to hire out his guns to the Two Link."

Jim Trent stiffened. An icy current seemed to be racing up his spine, jabbing at the base of his neck with sharp, prickly fingers. His father! His father, hiring out against this girl he had hoped was going to hire him! Well, that was the payoff. That ought to be enough to convince him he was licked, to show him what a loco thing it was to try to buck fate. He, Jim Trent, had been licked all along, but hadn't known it. Well, he knew it now. He knew now which side of the fence he belonged on, and the sooner he hopped over to his own side the better!

He was suddenly conscious of the hunger that gnawed at his guts. With a weary gesture he jamed on the crumpled Stetson and turned abruptly away. He was stopped by the girl's voice—a voice that seemed to flow mysteriously into his body and touch some deep inner core of his being.

"I'm sorry . . ." Her voice was soft, almost pleading. "But you can see, I've either got to follow Hemp's recommendations or—"

"Or have a mind of your own," supplied Jim Trent cuttingly. "Sure, ma'am, I see!" His eyes congealed into slivers of blue ice as he wheeled and faced the foreman. "Rawlins," he bit out harshly, "if it's any satisfaction for you to know it, you're drivin' an honest man to the owlhoot."

THE foreman's mouth tightened. "Have it that way if you like," he answered coldly. "Any other time I'd take a chance on you, Trent. I can't do it now and you ought to see why."

"Oh, sure! Well, adios—amigos!" Trent spun on his heel and started towards the corral, where he had left his pinto hitched to the gate post. He halted and glanced back as Rawlins called out: "Stop at the cook shack if you want and pick up some chuck."

"Thanks," Trent flung back spitefully, "but you'd better keep that for your *honest* hands!" He pivoted and scuffed on through the gravelly dirt of the ranch yard to the pinto. He rubbed the nose of the friendly little animal—you could depend on animals, he thought bitterly, if you couldn't on humans—and swung up to the kak with a movement that made his body a swift fluid arc against the piebald flank of the horse.

He looked back once towards the veranda as he swung the pinto around. Hemp Rawlins had gone, but the girl stood on the bottom step, looking after him with her hands tightened around the newel post. . . .

The hell with her, Trent thought angrily. She was as much to blame as the foreman for putting him in this spot. More, really, because if she'd had the nerve to assert herself the foreman would have been forced to take him on whether he wanted to or not.

Anger boiled up in him anew as he thought of the girl kowtowing to that meddling runt of a foreman, as he thought of all those other ranch owners who had turned him away with their hypocritical protestations of regret. Those ranchers obviously had expected he'd become an owlhooter, sooner or later. All right, he'd fulfill their expectations. If honesty meant nothing more than associating with a bunch of mealy-mouthed hypocrites like those hombres, then the hell with being honest! Bitter resentment churned up his mind, rose in

him like the sweep of a flood tide, beating down the dikes of his resistance, pounding and roaring through his fast-crumpling defenses. It didn't seem to make sense, though, that through all this seething torrent of thought, a pair of gray eyes should constantly loom before him, soft and pleading and filled with a vague reproach. . . .

Jim Trent had been lucky to run across that unbranded stray at the edge of the Saguaro badlands that night. He killed it without compunction, roasted several big steaks over a small fire of liveoak coals, and next morning, with his hunger satisfied and with the remainder of the cooked meat stowed carefully away in his saddlebags, he headed the pinto into the badlands. It was twenty-five miles across that hell-heated wasteland to the Big Smoke foothills where Ben Tucson's wild bunch hid out, but with his canteens filled and his horse fed and watered, Trent figured on making it with a minimum of risk. He'd crossed those badlands too many times to fear them now, although to one less familiar with the hazards the pasear could, he knew, end easily enough in disaster. . . .

It wasn't easy, reckoning distance in this barren, sand-strewn inferno, but Trent figured he was five or six miles in when, squinting ahead from under the down-turned brim of his Stetson, he caught sight of a shifting shadow slanting athwart a long twisting rock outcrop some fifty yards ahead. He nudged the pinto, and coming up slowly, with the caution characteristic of a man much used to solitary travel he observed that the shadow was cast from the sky.

HE glanced up and started. That sinister shape wheeling slowly above the sun-scorched boulder could be only one thing—a buzzard. And a buzzard, flying as low as that, could mean only one thing—*death!* Trent roweled the pinto and the lithe little animal quickened her pace under the unfamiliar bite of the steel.

There it was, stretched out in the thin margin of shade thrown by the rock, a rangy buckskin, stiffened in the uncompromising rigidity of death. Trent could see at a glance that its right front leg had been broken. The leg was twisted back unnaturally towards the animal's belly, as if it had died exactly where it had fallen. Trent dismounted and moving closer saw the gaping hole in the horse's forehead. A merciful bullet had put the poor beast out of its misery. But a bullet presupposed a human presence, and so far as Trent could see . . .

He crossed swiftly to the opposite side of the barrier. The man lay under a narrow overhang of the rock, where he had crawled apparently to take advantage of the slight additional protection afforded by the projection. His head rested on the crook of his right arm, showing one side of a weathered cheek with the cheekbone pushing up like an umbrella rib under skin that had the look of old faded parchment. As Trent stooped to examine the face more closely, he jerked out a startled cry of horror. The man sprawled out there on the hot sand dragging his breath gaspingly through puffed crusted lips was Trent's father, Blackjack Trent!

Jim Trent whirled and ran for the pinto. With trembling fingers he unloosed a canteen from the saddle pommel and rushed back to the man under the rock. The man moaned faintly as Trent trickled a few drops of water on his swollen tongue, but the relief had come too late. The eyes of Blackjack Trent already were glazing, and as his son raised him to sluice a few more drops of the water down his throat, his head fell back and his body relaxed limply in Trent's arms. . . .

Trent gently lowered the body back

to the sand, then stood, staring down at it in somber contemplation. He felt, strangely, neither grief nor relief at the sight of his father lying there dead at his feet. Death had torn the canker of hate from his heart, but death could not replace it with sorrow. Many had feared Blackjack Trent; none would mourn him. It wasn't much of an epitaph for a man. . . .

Jim Trent turned and walked back to the dead buckskin. Among other articles, there was a small steel frying pan lashed to the saddle pommel. A frying pan was hardly an adequate substitute for a shovel, but it was the best available and would have to serve.

It took him an hour to scoop out enough sand for a grave. As he dragged the shrunken body over to the shallow trench that was to be the last resting place of Blackjack Trent, he noticed a damp spot on the dead man's trousers, just above the knee of the left leg. A bullet had gouged a hole through the outlaw's lower thigh. That, then, was the reason Blackjack Trent had been unable to keep on by foot, after the buckskin had caved. He couldn't walk. Yet he'd been traveling towards the Two Link—evidently bent on keeping his agreement to hire out his guns to Link Daggett.

Link Daggett! Jim Trent paused in the act of rolling the emaciated body into the trench and ran his fingers swiftly through the dead man's pockets. It wasn't much of an inheritance his exploring fingers turned up: eleven soiled one-dollar bills, a few worthless odds and ends, and an envelope addressed to B. Trent and postmarked from Saguaro —the town nearest Link Daggett's spread!

Trent dug into the envelope and took out a letter. He read it slowly, a thoughtful frown creasing his forehead as he finished it and tucked it back carefully into the envelope. Well, he thought, why not? Wasn't it about time that he struck back at some of those who had struck at him? Why should he hesitate, when fate itself now put the means at his disposal?

IT took just a few minutes to dump the corpse into the pit and cover it over with sand. There was nothing with which to mark the grave, and, Jim Trent reflected harshly, no reason why it should be marked. The rock would be Blackjack Trent's headstone, his epitaph, appropriately, a blank.

Trent swung up to the saddle, meditating darkly that in burying Blackjack Trent he had been far from burying remembrance of the man's evil past. That probably would remain to thwart and haunt him to the end of his days. Strangely, though, when Trent kneed his horse he didn't go towards Ben Tucson's camp in the Big Smoke foothills. Instead he reined the animal around and headed back in the direction from which he had just come.

It was forenoon of the next day when Jim Trent rode in sight of the Two Link outbuildings, and farther on caught a glimpse of the rambling 'dobe ranch house, set back slightly from the crest of a hill in the sprawling shade of two big cottonwoods. As he jogged down past the white-painted corral gate and came abreast of the low wooden bunk house, a man in blue denim Levis appeared in the doorway and stood staring at him. The man was tall and powerfully built, with an expressionless face and deep-set black eyes that made Trent think of wormholes in a piece of rotten wood.

"Wait a minute, pilgrim," the man said tonelessly. "We got a custom here of havin' a man state his business before he goes past this bunk house."

Trent pulled up and fixed the man with a cold glance. "It's probably a nice custom," he remarked, "but my

business is with Link Daggett."

The man in the Levis didn't move from the doorway. He said: "What's your name?"

Trent answered sharply, "My name's Trent. Now where do I find Link Daggett?"

"Hell," the man's tone became more cordial, "why didn't yuh say who yuh was in the first place?" He looked back into the bunk house and called, "Hey, Fisheye, come out here and take care o' this hoss." Then he stepped down from the doorway and said to Trent: "I'm Pete Vega, Link's foreman. The boss expects yuh. Come on."

Trent got down and started with Vega up the hill towards the ranch house. The foreman wasn't communicative on the short walk up, but neither was Jim Trent. Trent was wondering, on sober second thought whether this wasn't a loco stunt, coming up here this way to hire out to Link Daggett in the name of Blackjack Trent.

The funny part was, he no longer was quite sure why he was doing it. For a job? Maybe. For a chance to square accounts with the girl? Well, that idea had been in his mind, at first. But why should he go out of his way to harm this girl, just because he was resentful at the way the world had treated him? Hadn't it treated her harshly, too? Wasn't this big, hard-faced gunnie who walked at his side the hombre who'd shot and killed her father? Did he want to side men like that, for revenge, money, or any other reason?

Sure, she could have hired him if she'd wanted to, could have overruled her foreman's veto. But suppose he'd been in her place . . . had no one to trust or turn to but the foreman. Wouldn't he have had to do the same thing she had done? No, some way he no longer felt any bitterness towards her, perhaps hadn't ever felt any, really. It was strange, the way his resentment always seemed to dissolve before the memory of those quiet gray eyes, that low, cool voice that reminded him somehow of brook water rippling over mossy stones. And when she had said she was sorry, her lip had trembled, and her eyes—there had been something in her eyes. . . .

Pete Vega was saying: "Reckon we'll find the boss in the office. Come on."

TRENT went with him up the steps to the ranch house veranda, then inside into a wide, low-ceilinged hallway. Vega opened the first door on the right side of the hallway and Trent stepped in behind him.

Link Daggett was seated behind a roll-top desk at the far corner of the room—a big-bodied, square-jawed man with a loose roll of unhealthy looking fat pouring into the collar of his gray flannel shirt. The jaw bespoke ruthlessness, the thick lower lip jutting out stiffly from under the upper, a grim fixity of purpose. The Two Link owner slanted a quick look at Trent from under low-lidded eyes, dormant only in appearance.

But Jim Trent had glanced only briefly at Link Daggett. He was staring at the girl who sat lashed to a chair at Daggett's side, with only her slim graceful arms free. The girl was Linda Charles.

Pete Vega broke out, "Boss, this is—"

Link Daggett cut him off with a wave of the hand. "I know, Blackjack Trent. Sit down, Trent."

Trent warned the girl with a glance as he took the chair Link Daggett pushed out to him and sat in it. He hoped she'd savvy what he meant; because, in that moment, there was no doubt whatever in Jim Trent's mind as to which side he intended fighting

on. . . .

"I suppose," Daggett put out cautiously, "you followed my instructions and brought my letter to identify yourself."

Trent produced the envelope he had found among Blackjack Trent's effects and slapped it down on the desk.

Linda Charles stared in mute surprise as Daggett took it and turned it over briefly in his puffy fingers. He looked up. "Okay, Trent. Now here's the setup. My friend Miss Charles here"—he threw a mocking glance at the trussed-up girl—"must get her beef herd to Sunoco by day after tomorrow, Saturday, or default on her note to the bank and lose her spread. Well, one of my men found Miss Charles riding fence over near the Two Link this morning and invited her over here as my guest. That's about all, I guess, except that by the time Miss Charles has concluded her visit, I'm afraid she'll be in default with the bank and I will be forced to take over the Bar C."

Pete Vega said: "But boss, suppose that Rawlins hombre takes it into his head to start the drive without her orders? Then we'd have to fight the crew and—"

"That won't be necessary now," interrupted Link Daggett smoothly. "I think that rather than see her crew gunned down, Miss Charles will be glad to drop a note to Mr. Rawlins stating that she has been called out of the state unexpectedly by the death of an aunt, and that the drive is not to start until she gets back as the bank has kindly consented to grant her an extension on the note."

"But who'll you get to take it over?" objected Pete Vega. "Rawlins might recognize—"

"That," put in Link Daggett with a satisfied smile, "is where our friend Blackjack Trent will come in. You're not acquainted with Rawlins, are you, Trent?"

The meaning of the glance Jim Trent threw at the girl was unmistakable. "Can't say as I've had the pleasure of meeting the gent."

"And," Daggett turned with exaggerated solicitude toward his prisoner, "you will have no objection to lending us your assistance, I take it, Miss Charles? I might mention that, in case you did feel any hesitation, our segundo here, Mr. Fisheye Farber, has been known to do indelicate and extremely painful things to a person's fingernails. . . ."

The girl thrilled Trent with a swift glance of understanding as she answered in a level voice: "You won't have to resort to torture, if that's what you mean. I'll write it."

"In that case," Link Daggett sighed heavily, "I'm afraid this may turn out to be a very humdrum proceeding after all."

He dipped his pen into an inkwell and handed it to Linda Charles. . . .

IT was nearing dusk when Jim Trent rode back from his pasear to the Bar C. He had made sure, before leaving, that no harm was likely to befall Linda Charles during his absence. The girl, he had ascertained, was locked up in a storeroom at the rear of the ranch house, but her bonds had been removed so that she was in no physical discomfort. As he reined up in front of the bunk house, purple shadows were beginning to blot up the last faint pools of gold left by the sun. He came down out of the saddle as Pete Vega lolled out to the doorway, chewing a toothpick.

"How'd he take it?" asked Vega.

Trent made a pretense of grinning. "Swallowed it hook, line and sinker."

"I'm damned glad o' that," grumbled the foreman. "The boys ain't had a night off in a month, and they're startin'

to get jittery. I'll tell 'em they can go to town tonight and celebrate—a good drunk'll do 'em good."

A surge of excitement ran through Trent. This might be the chance he'd been waiting for! If the Two Link hands all went to town, maybe he could break into the storeroom and free Linda Charles.

He forced his voice to sound matter-of-fact. "Well, reckon I'll put this cayuse in the corral and then see if the grub wrangler can maybe scare me up a little chuck."

"Sure," Vega said, rotating the toothpick around the hub of his tongue, "put the hoss up." Then he stepped down negligently from the doorway and said: "Never mind, I'll put up the hoss. You better go up and report to the boss. Tell him me and Fisheye'll be up later."

Trent gestured indifferently. "Sure. See you later then." He tossed the reins over the pinto and tightened his gunbelt as he swiveled and started up the hill toward the ranch house. This Fisheye, he reflected, must be an hombre of equal importance, in Link Daggett's eyes, with Pete Vega. Fisheye, therefore, would be one more person he'd have to guard against, for Fisheye would be unlikely to go to town with the hands if Vega didn't.

Just before he topped the rise below which the ranch house lay sprawled, Trent glanced backward down the hill toward the bunk house. Pete Vega was turning the pinto into the corral, but there was nobody in sight around the bunk house. Stalked by shadows, the low 'dobe ranch house seemed preternaturally quiet. A light breeze ran its fingers through the cottonwoods, stirring the leaves to a faint whispering. Trent glanced up at the deserted veranda, then, casting a quick look about, stepped around guardedly to the back of the house.

The storeroom, he figured, must be that shedlike projection just off the kitchen, with the high, star-shaped window in it, too small to permit passage of a human body. With another cautious look about, Trent picked up a handful of gravel and tossed it up at the window.

For a moment there was no sound. Then his ears caught a faint scraping noise, as if someone were dragging a chair across the floor. After that there was a lengthy interval of silence. Suspense bit at Trent's nerves, stiffened his lank frame to a ramrod rigidity. Then the window screaked, opened outward from the bottom a few cautious inches.

Trent flattened himself tensely against the wall, waiting. . . .

"Jim!" The low-pitched voice fluttered down sibilantly out of the darkness. "Jim! Is it you?"

A tingling current raced up Jim Trent's spine, exploded shiveringly through his body. He forgot, in that moment, the danger that lay ahead of them both; thought only that she had called him Jim, had spoken his name softly, intimately. . . .

HE stepped out from the wall, looked up to where her white, drawn face was framed by the window. And suddenly he knew: knew why he had been unable to forget those soft gray eyes, why the sound of her voice kept ringing in his mind, like the deep, mellow note of a bell.

His voice was a hoarse whisper, channeling the gloom. "I just wanted to tell you, ma'am, everything's all right. I saw Rawlins, and he's starting the drive. The herd'll be at the railhead by tomorrow night."

"Jim," she breathed, "that's wonderful!"

"Listen." He spoke urgently, in a low, warning voice. "I've got to report to Daggett now. Be on your guard. If I can, I'll be back later."

She answered in a tense whisper. "I'll be ready. . . . And—be careful, Jim."

He heard the window creak shut, then silence fell again, weighted, ominous. His body was just a vague blur now against the shadows lowering around the ranch house, sheeting it in deepening hues of dusk. Hugging the wall, stepping cautiously, he worked his way back toward the front of the house, thinking of her warning to him to be careful. Maybe it was the same warning she'd given anybody. But the way she had spoken his name, when she had first come to the window. . . .

A light glowed palely through the curtained windows of the office as Jim Trent came to the veranda. He made no effort now to deaden the sound of his movements, and his boot heels rang measuredly on the steps as he went to the front door and passed on into the hallway. He paused before the door to Link Daggett's office and knocked. Then, in response to a muffled, "Come in," he pulled it open and walked in.

Link Daggett was seated behind the roll-top desk at the far side of the room, and with him, Trent saw, was another man—a man whose right eye was filmed with a gray glaze, giving his angular, sharp-chinned face a hideously contorted cast as he stared intently at Trent with the one good optic.

Daggett said: "Blackjack, meet Fisheye Farber. Fisheye sees more with that one eye of his than most of my men can see with two."

"Howdy," acknowledged Trent. He was conscious of Fisheye's good eye plucking at him like a claw, picking him over from head to toe.

Fisheye stood a little to the right of Link Daggett with his back to the wall, a big-boned man with a vulturine neck tucked back flabbily into scrawny shoulders. Without taking his eye from Trent he said in a cold, matter-of-fact voice: "That ain't Blackjack Trent, Link."

As Daggett spun in the swivel chair to face Fisheye, an icy needle seemed to jab at Trent's spine.

"You're crazy!" blurted Daggett. "He had my letter, didn't he? He—"

Fisheye broke in flatly: "You're the crazy one, Link." A gun glittered suddenly in his big-knuckled fist. "Blackjack Trent was a left-hander. Well, this hombre draws from the right. He—"

The gun roared with a bright twist of flame as Jim Trent sprang behind the desk and hurled himself against it with a pile-driving smash of his bunched-up body. The desk tilted, went toppling forward. . . .

Daggett, wheeling wildly out of the way in the swivel chair, crashed into Fisheye and spoiled the segundo's aim just as he drove a second shot at Jim Trent. The slug chunked harmlessly into the ceiling.

TRENT straightened, jabbed a hand to his hip. A split second only separated that swift downthrust and the blasting belch of red from the muzzle of his big Colt. Through the thick reek of the powdersmoke Trent saw Fisheye jerk upright, saw the six-gun drop from fingers suddenly spattered with blood. Link Daggett was cursing, pawing his way out of the wreckage of the smashed desk and a splintered swivel chair.

"Drop your gun," Trent ordered, "and be plumb careful how you do it."

Daggett obeyed. Then he took a lumbering step forward, stood glaring at Trent with his long arms dangling loosely at his sides, like those of a huge ape. Fisheye had slumped back against the wall, his head twisted to one side, breathing in hoarse, jerky gusts.

Daggett snarled, "Trent, you'll wish you hadn't butted into this before you're through!"

"He's through now," said a rasping voice from the doorway. Pete Vega's gun shimmered bluely in the spread of light from the room's green-shaded drop lamp. "All right, Trent," Vega instructed coldly, "swing around slow and drop that hogleg."

Bitter anger swept Trent, smashed over him in a crushing wave of despair. Curse his blind stupidity! Why hadn't he remembered about Vega? Why—

A hoarse cry of warning broke suddenly from Link Daggett. "Pete! Look out!"

Trent spun at a half crouch, gun up.

Pete Vega was crumpling in the doorway . . . his long face stiffened in a faint expression of surprise.

Warned intuitively of his danger, Trent whirled to get Daggett back in front of his big peacemaker. The Two Link owner had retrieved his gun and was up on one knee with it as Trent pivoted. Dagget fired without waiting to rise.

The slug ripped into Trent's shoulder, spun him sideways as a second shot whipped past his ear. Red haze boiled up in front of him as he threw down at the jiggling roll of fat under Daggett's chin and worked the trigger. The lifting powder smoke drew up a curtain between the two men, shut off Trent's view of his target. As Trent's wobbling knees gave way, the last he remembered was hearing a woman's scream, a sound that seemed to drive red-hot knives through his bullet-rived shoulder. . . .

It seemed to Trent, at first, as if the voice came from a great distance, then, cool and low, it sounded just overhead and Linda Charles was looking down at him, her gray eyes soft and filled with a yearning tenderness.

"Jim. . . ." Jim Trent saw that her lips were trembling. "Oh, Jim, you're all right!"

He managed a grin in spite of the throbbing ache of his shoulder. "Why sure," he said. "Sure, I'm all right." He added after a pause: "This bandage you put on feels plumb good, ma'am. I don't guess an hombre could help feeling improved with you for a nurse!"

SHE smiled then, though her eyes were still misty, and helped him into a chair. He sank down in it relievedly, suggested: "And now, young lady, I reckon you've got some things to explain. First, how'd you bust jail?"

"Oh, that," she tantalized. "That was easy!"

"Easy or hard," he said, 'it was a plumb lucky jailbreak for me."

"All right." Jim Trent couldn't quite decide whether her eyes were prettiest when she smiled or when she was serious. "That was the storeroom, you know, where they had me locked up, and they kept a lot of tools there. There was a long-handled spade that looked to be about the heaviest thing, so when you were busy out here pushing over desks and things, I broke down the door with the spade."

"And that's not all you broke with it," suggested Jim Trent.

Reluctantly she looked toward the door at the sprawled inert figure of Pete Vega. "No," she agreed soberly, "that wasn't all."

"What about Daggett?"

"You killed him. Daggett and . . ."

She stopped; her body tensed to sudden attention. The sound was indistinct at first, then plainer—a deep, hollow rumbling, like the first faint onset of thunder.

Jim Trent heard it then, thrilled to the elemental, blood-quickening tumult of it.

"The drive," he said with excitement in his voice. "Your drive's going through, Linda!"

Her gray eyes came down to him lingeringly. "The drive," she repeated softly. Then: "Our drive, Jim!"

Straw Boss for a One-Horse Outfit

By JOHN CURTIS

Author of "Prairie Horse-Thieves," etc.

Rustlers backed by a range-hogging outfit like the vast Box Dot could steal a lot of cattle, but Pete Travis knew the code of the Texas Panhandle would gun-doom the range's final play!

"HOSS race? You're loco! We got to *git* him before he crowds us off the range entire! Where's Taylor now? Where's Sloan? Where's—"

"Workin' for wages. While Matt Sims' Box Dot cows eat the grass them sidekicks of ours used to own. You an' me come next on Sims' list."

"Well? Them ain't a six-gun the onliest way—"

"So I bragged Gray Wonder was the best quarter hoss in the Texas Panhandle. Which it is—maybe."

For the second time Pete Travis' drawl interrupted the angry tirade. Now he tilted back against the wall of his ranchhouse and sat with cigarette smoke curling from each nostril while he stared the raging old-timer he addressed into silence. Although Pete drawled, his tone lacked nothing in grimness. He also admitted the vital fact, that in some way, somehow, Sims must be stopped, broken, decisively and irretrievably defeated. Otherwise the Box Dot outfit would absorb every ranch between the Verde hills and the river. Already Sims had half that territory.

There had been happy-go-lucky, generous Taylor. He had signed a neighbor's note—and paid it. Taylor had left the county, broke, but later the neighbor came back and took a job as Sims' foreman. There had been Sloan. Rustlers had stolen him blind until the sheriff sold him out—to Sims. Rustlers backed by a big outfit like the Box Dot can steal a

lot, fast; but while everyone suspected Sims' connivance, no one could prove a thing. There had been Rusty Rhodes. His water had been poisoned during a drought.

Until now the Box Dot was bordered by the ranches of Pete Travis and old Jim Nesbitt. Figuratively as well as literally Travis' back was to the wall, and if Jim was desperate enough to talk gunplay, he had reason. Affairs were at the breaking point. Both knew that Sims was setting in motion some underhand scheme for their ruin.

They sat in the scanty shade of the veranda. Before them the range, burned to brown and tan by drought and an August sun, shimmered in the heat. In the distance haze or dust turned the sky green-blue just above the Verde hills. In silence Pete finished his cigarette. He was a long-legged, yellow-haired kid of twenty-four, with a good-sized nose and a wide mouth. Good natured rather than good looking; better known for picking a banjo and for minding his own business than anything else.

His father, Pop Travis, had been a square shooting, shrewd old-timer, highly respected in the county. He had been dead six months. Pete had inherited the ranch, the horses, including Gray Wonder, which was of the steel dust colored Montana strain which produces the best quarter horses in the West, and his father's feud with Matt Sims. The county was also beginning to believe Pete had inherited his father's nerve and level head. That was why stringy, leather-faced old Nesbitt had ridden over to talk war with the son of his former friend.

"The point is," said Pete suddenly, "that dry gulchin's already been tried. We know Rusty Rhodes had it in mind. Yuh recollect we picked him up drilled plumb workmanlike. Maybe he met Sims. Maybe Sims met him—which is more likely, bein' as the black mustache buzzard was never knowed to fight fair. Anyhow, if yuh did go out an' git him, the state of Texas would just give yuh a free rope an' a funeral. That ain't my idea only," Pete added. "Me an' pap talked things over considerable last winter. You an' me run eight punchers between us. Sims pays twenty-five—as good at slingin' a Colt, or better. Anyhow a range war jest breaks everybody, an' dry gulchin' ain't no job for a decent Texan. Sims's out for our scalps, sure. But by havin' a hoss race we'll anyways get a run for our money."

"Your pap was a right smart runnin' hoss man, an' Gray Wonder's fast," Jim conceded grudgingly. "But yuh know Sims has just bought him a bay runnin' hoss that ain't a broken down plug by no manner of means. Looks like he was *fixin'* to git us in a race."

"He is," said Pete grimly. "Fact is, if my eyes don't lie, that's Matt hisself ridin' this way to fix it right now." The legs of Pete's chair struck the veranda floor as he leaned forward. He clutched Jim's knee with a force that made the older man wince. "Leave me talk to him and back my play," Pete continued fiercely. "I don't want to shoot him, particular. I crave to show him up for a dirty skunk an' *break* him, cows an' land, like he busted Sloan an' pore old trustin' Taylor! He's a comin' to cook up the dirtiest, crookedest race he can set his mind to—"

"An' you're lettin' him!"

Pete's eyes blazed.

"I'm givin' a dirty crook rope an' hopin' to hell he hangs hisself!" he said. "Pap taught me all he knowed about the runnin' hoss game; I've seen that bay, an' I'm bettin' my last dollar that in a fair race Gray Wonder's faster!"

"Fair race! He's sure to fix the judges anyhow," growled old Nesbitt. The sarcasm was obvious, and for a minute the old-timer sat frowning, seamed brown chin in gnarled brown hand. Then he looked up.

"We're pardners, sort of, so my money's with yours," he said simply. "But watch out for yo'self, Pete. A race of this yere kind's liable to come to gunplay in the end."

WHEN Sims rode up to the two on the veranda he seemed to be of the same opinion. Certainly he neither made a pretense of friendliness nor wasted time on courtesy. He dismounted watchfully—a tall man in the ruthless forties, thin to the point of emaciation, his drooping mustache jet black in contrast to a sallow complexion. His skin was drawn tight on forehead and cheeks and across the bridge of a prominent hooked nose. His eyes were bright and opaquely black as bits of coal. Something seemed gnawing at Matt Sims' vitals. He was a

man consumed from within; not by conscience, for he had none—probably acute dyspepsia was responsible for a hatred of humankind that was pretty nearly all inclusive.

"Callin' your brag," he addressed Pete harshly. "My Show Boy can outrun your Gray Wonder. For a thousand side bet."

"Sure too bad you're wrong complete," Pete drawled, and tilted his chair against the ranch-house wall, letting Sims wait while he built a cigarette. "You're plumb wrong about your bay, which is ewe necked an' without no breedin'. Got a coat like a range pony's. Can't expect a hoss to run much without yuh take care of him." Pete's eye wandered to the stable back of his house, a twelve by fifteen structure of cottonwood poles roughly chinked with mud, just big enough to house Gray Wonder alone. The other horses on the ranch lived as best they could in the open. Gray Wonder's hair ain't longer than a mouse's," said Pete. "Sure would like to race—only I ain't got a thousand cash."

Sims' eyes glittered. He had allowed the bay's coat to grow shaggy purposely, but Show Boy was of thoroughbred stock. He had expected Pete to know that, and quibble over it. A quarter race is so short that range ponies, which reach their full speed quickly, have beaten thoroughbreds over and over again, but every yard the course is lengthened gives the longer striding horse an advantage.

"If yuh ain't yallow your note is good," Sims sneered. "Run yuh six furlongs two weeks from Saturday. Each ride our own hoss."

"Quarter race, an' wheel-and-run start," Pete retorted, who was perfectly well aware that Show Boy was a thoroughbred, and wished in his turn to guide Sims into a trap. In a wheel and run start the horses face in the opposite direction from the finish line, and in the turn a range-bred horse will invariably obtain a big advantage.

It is a very unfair method, even more unfair than the stand-and-run start, in which the horses start from a standstill when the judge fires a revolver, but Pete wanted a talking point to cut down the length of the race. As he expected, Sims shook his head.

"Lap-an'-tap start," the latter insisted. "Tell yuh what: six hundred yards, first nose across the finish gits the money, an' cash—or notes—in the saloonkeeper's safe." Sims emphasized the words notes, and looked hard at old Jim. The old-timer, however, nudged Pete in the ribs and shook his head slightly. Six hundred yards was still a rather long race for a quarter horse.

"Suits me," said Pete, disregarding the warning. "The thousand all yuh want to put up, Sims? Bein' as notes goes, Jim might back me, say for five hundred."

"Covered," Sims snapped. The old-timer nodded slowly, and the thin-faced ranchman added hastily. "Might want to put up more after I see how my hoss trains. Ain't run him none since I got him."

"Yeah, we might," Pete drawled. "Trainin' is important, but you're sure puttin' your money on a dog, Sims. Ranch an' stock, Jim an' me might bet way up. Ten or twelve thousand."

The coal-black eyes glittered, but Sims shook his head and hoisted himself into the saddle. "We'll see, later," he called over his shoulder as he rode off.

While he was in sight Jim had to contain himself, but it took effort. The old-timer's face turned purple.

"Yuh damn' loco kid!" he whispered under his breath, and when it was possible to do so, jumped to his feet and exploded.

"Call yourself a runnin' hoss man, or the son of one!" he roared, striding the length of the veranda. "Damn it, lap-an'-tap is a square start, an' six hundred yards is a fair distance. Do you all think Sims's goin' to put up ten or twelve *thousand*—damn! That's a lot of money, boy," beads of perspiration formed on the old man's forehead, "unless he knows he's got your hoss beat?"

"NOPE."

Sheer emotion dropped Jim's voice to a whisper.

"Then what did you play into his hand for?" he gasped. "Boy, that'll be bettin' every cow we got!"

"Likewise every cow Sims owns—in his own name!" Pete retorted violently. "His cold deck stealin's have left him mortgaged heavy at the bank. I'm fightin', Jim! We can't win back the Verde

range with a forty-five, but we might with a hoss race, an' what I want is for Sims or us to be busted complete! An' lemme tell yuh, if that bet goes down—which I hope to hell it does—the race is goin' to be *fair*. But *Sims ain't goin' to think so!*"

Jim stared.

"Well, anyhow, I'd sleep in Gray Wonder's stall the next two weeks," he remarked pointedly.

"I aim to when the time comes—which ain't yet," Pete snapped. "Yuh let me handle this alone, old-timer. I done gave Sims plenty of rope, an' I'm jest waitin' to see whether he ties a slipknot in it. Meanwhile I'm guardin'—an' trainin'—our hoss in my own way."

Pete's way would have seemed peculiar to any one who observed his actions during the rest of that afternoon. No one did. He sent Jim home and searched the range with a glass to insure that no spy was watching; then heated the ranch forge and reshod Gray Wonder on all four hoofs. Since the shoes he removed were not worn, and in perfect condition, the act was peculiar; and the new shoes with which Pete replaced the old were more unorthodox still.

Gray Wonder was cross shod when Pete led him back to the stable.

Now unless a running horse has some fault in its stride its shoes should weigh the same to an ounce. Gray Wonder's stride was flawless, yet on the off front and the rear hind foot Pete had clinched a shoe considerably heavier than the other two. That is cross shoeing. It is almost impossible to notice. The difference of six ounces or so in weight isn't apparent when the shoes are nailed to a horse's feet, nor is there any perceptible change in the horse's running form. The effect is the same a man would experience if he had to sprint wearing a sneaker on one foot and an ordinary street shoe on the other. He could run, all right, but not quite his best, because on every stride the heavier shoe would throw him slightly out of balance.

Cross shoeing was the extent of Pete's preparations. For the rest of the week he was negligent. His punchers found it easy to get permission to go to town. Nothing was said if they stayed all night, and, very naturally, they did. Pete himself slept soundly.

Even when he was roused one dark night shortly before moonrise by the nicker of a horse, instantly checked, as though some one had gripped the nostrils, Pete only rose in bed, smiled to himself, and flopped back into the blankets. He slept fitfully, however. An hour later he was crouching by a window from which he could see the barn.

In the faint gray blackness mingled of moonlight and the coming dawn a man led Gray Wonder across the range back into the stable. He came from the direction of the Box Dot, and Pete was forced to admire his skill as a horse thief. There was not a sound when he returned the horse to its stall. The barn door closed without a squeak, and the man faded into the dim light unchallenged, though Pete had a Winchester in his hand.

"Knowed Matt wouldn't bet heavy on no chance," Pete exulted to himself, and slipped out to the barn to see if Gray Wonder had been injured. He thought not, and when he examined the horse he was amazed by the skill with which Sims had turned the trick. The evidence Gray Wonder had been raced that night was of the slightest. The horse was tired. There was a patch of dried sweat not much bigger than a dime under his belly, which the men who had rubbed him down by lantern-light had missed.

"Stole an' raced by moon light, weren't yuh, old oat burner?" Pete whispered. "Reckon Sims' bay showed yuh the way. Yeah, reckon he had yuh day lighted. I'll know how bad yuh was beat by the way he places his bets. But don't yuh worry none, old hoss, because next time yuh'll run with eight ounce plates on all four hoofs!"

CAREFULLY Pete regroomed and reshod the horse while there was no one around the ranch to see. Then he went to bed, but the next morning, when one of his punchers returned, he gave orders that "from now on one of us is goin' to sit in Gray Wonder's stall day an' night with a six-gun, an' crack down on ary thing that looks queer."

When the guard was posted Pete went over to see Jim. By noon he was sitting on the old-timer's veranda, a cigarette between his fingers.

"Sims stole Gray Wonder last night," he remarked without preliminary. "Raced him against Show Boy by moon-

light. Reckon Sims'll be wantin' to bet heavy when we see him in town."

The blood rose dark into Jim's mahogany-colored cheeks. He jerked his lean six-feet erect; grimly, through his teeth, he uttered his opinion of "hoss stealin' hombres—snake eyes, snake blooded, snake entire 'ceptin' only the rattles, that ought to be got rid of like any other varmint. Got a good gun?" he ended. "We ain't playin' no hand we know was dealt from a cold deck!"

"Triggerless Colt with the hammer an' seat honed smooth. It'll fire at a flip of the thumb," Pete drawled. "Now that yuh've spouted your mad out lemme tell yuh the rest. I'm takin' Sims' bets, but I want that you should hold off till race day. He might have hurt Gray Wonder, racin' him thataway."

"But—"

"Shore, the deck was cold but 'twas me that stacked it," Pete declared. "Gray Wonder was cross shod. Only runnin' horse men know that trick, but Gray Wonder run near ten yards slower last night than he will Saturday." Briefly Pete explained. "We gave Sims rope. Because he was crooked he knotted it 'round his own neck. Saturday we jerk the noose tight," he concluded, only to have Jim frown and shake his head.

"We ain't playin' no sure thing," he pointed out. "If the bay beat Gray Wonder by *more* than ten yards damned if I see where yuh was so smart!"

"Ain't askin' a shore thing," Pete retorted. He laid his hand on the older man's knee for added emphasis, and continued earnestly. "You're thinkin' too much of our friends that have been run off this range by a coyote. I ain't forgot Sloan and Taylor none—but hombre! If I wouldn't back my own hoss to my last dollar in a fair race, I wouldn't be a running hoss man; no, nor even a lover of hosses, either. Nothin' gets me on the prod quicker than crooked racin', and I ain't doin' none personal. I 'low I got the best hoss, so I'm playin' my ranch on his nose. You can do as yuh please!"

The race was set for Saturday afternoon at three o'clock. The day was hot and clear—the dry, bracing heat of southwest Texas. By noon the town was full. Spurs rattled on the sidewalks. The store verandas were crowded with punchers, who argued horses vehemently, excitedly, flushed somewhat by whisky, more by excitement.

Any race would have drawn the range for seventy miles around. This race, now that news had gone out that in addition to the original stakes of fifteen hundred dollars, Pete had met Sims two days before the race and bet a note to the full value of his ranch, drew every man within a four-days ride to the contest.

Sims' punchers from the Box Dot swaggered up and down the single street. They bet all they had. Cash first, then down to saddles and boots. There were plenty of takers. Thoroughbreds were not too highly thought of. The steel dust strain everyone knew, and Sims took advantage of the local pride which made natives favor the Western bred horse.

The skin was drawn tighter than ever over his forehead and nose. His black eyes blazed, his yellow skin was brick red with excitement and greed. Note after note went into the stake-holder's safe, until men began to whisper that Sims had gone plumb hogwild.

STILL he was not satisfied. As he went to lead the bay to the improvised race course—a level stretch of six hundred yards from which the greasewood had been cleared in a strip ten feet wide—he came face to face with Jim.

"Fust nose gits the money," Sims croaked hoarsely. That slogan had been his battle cry all day. It preceded and confirmed every bet he made. "Here's your last chance, unless you're content with a tin-horn bet—or are skeered!"

"You're goin' too far, hombre," Jim warned. "You don't look like no grizzly to me. I ain't skeered—no way."

"Cover a bet of five thousand? Be more only I'm hocked plumb to the last slick ear," Sims taunted.

"Cover yuh Thataway, or any other yuh make necessary," said Jim coldly. "I'm backin' my pardner's hoss, an' my pardner."

The challenge was understood. Sims tensed. So did his foreman and two of the Box Dot punchers who stood behind him, but it was time to race, and after a second Sims shrugged. The two wrote out their bets in grim silence. When

Sims went to get his horse, Jim, with his eyes still frosty, strode to the starting line. Sims' punchers followed and stopped behind him. Sims' foreman took a position on the opposite side of the narrow track with the starting judge, while the crowd massed itself around the finish line.

Since the start was to be lap-and-tap, the judge—chosen because he was a deputy sheriff, though he was friendly with Sims and a man Jim most emphatically did not trust—took a sack of flour and poured a straight white streak across the ground. He stood at one side. A short distance away Gray Wonder and Sims' bay were trembling and prancing.

Both Pete and Sims were using light saddles. Both had stripped to boots, trousers, and shirt, but both were carrying two and a half pounds of weight that might have been dispensed with. Pete had stuck his triggerless Colt into the waistband of his trousers. Sims had retained his gun belt as well. His holster was tied down to his right knee.

In a quarter race on the range there are practically no rules. First nose gets the money. To quirt another horse, to slash a rival rider across the face, to do a dozen other tricks that would disqualify a jockey on an Eastern race track are all considered fair. Pete and Sims were making no special effort to keep their horses side by side. At the judge's signal they would rush to the starting line. If when they crossed the line the horses were lapped, a tap from the judge would start the race. Half a length or so at the start makes very little difference, although if either horse were daylighted the judge would call them back. But both riders wanted every advantage. Even half a length means something in a race that would be finished in twenty-four or twenty-five seconds.

A gasp from the crowd. The bay and the gray horse dashed forward, Gray Wonder leading. Smaller than the thoroughbred, quicker on his feet, he led by almost a length in the dash for the line. The horses were lapped in Jim's opinion, but the judge shook his head. They were called back.

"Start was fair," gritted the old timer.

"Like hell," growled the deputy, but he reddened. It was Sims' men who answered. The tip of a six-gun touched Jim in the small of the back. Across the track Sims' foreman grinned.

"We all aim to let the judge decide, feller!" he whispered.

Hastily the judge signaled before a spectator could observe the argument. Again the horses came thundering down, but this time the bay was in the lead. They were lapped at the start. Gray Wonder's nose was at the bay's withers, an inch or two farther back and the start would have been palpably unfair, but the judge shouted, the tap was given and they were off.

STIFF with fury old Jim stood with a gun muzzle rammed against his back. On Gray Wonder Pete was bent forward, nose almost in the mane of his mount, and Gray Wonder too seemed to stretch out and hug the ground. Momentarily in the flying sand and dust the horses raced side by side. Then Sims' quirt rose and fell. His spurs jabbed home, and yet, in the first fifty yards without any punishment from Pete, Gray Wonder's nose commenced to creep forward along the flank of the bay. Crept even with Sims' stirrup, crept even with the bay's shoulder, would have crept nose to nose and passed had not Sims suddenly flung himself sidewise in the saddle and stuck out his left foot with his spur against Gray Wonder's chest.

At the jab of steel the little horse recoiled, stumbled in its stride, and then with the great heart of the true running horse, strove to pull out and pass beyond the spur that barred its way. Or so it seemed, for with his spurred boot still extended Sims crowded the bay toward the side of the track, until on the narrow track Gray Wonder could not pass unless it took to the greasewood.

No chance of winning on that. Four hundred yards away was the finish line. If Gray Wonder did not trip in the brush he would lose a length or more in the rough going. First nose got the money, and dirty tactics, if fair under the quarter race code, were cheating the better horse of victory.

Pete swung erect in the saddle, pulled at the bit, and in a stride dropped behind, until Gray Wonder's shoulder was again even with the bay's withers. Then

for the first time Pete's quirt slashed the gray. With a heave of his shoulders he lifted Gray Wonder forward and to the right, so that the gray's shoulder collided with the bay, throwing Show Boy off stride. Sims had asked for it.

The collision made both horses stumble. Both nearly fell, but the smaller, quicker gray found his feet before the bay thoroughbred. Sims yelled with rage. His quirt slashed across Pete's face. He thrust out his spur, but the advantage gained at the start by the judge's connivance was gone. The two horses were neck and neck; it was ride and run for the finish line, with the first nose to get the money.

On the right side a swearing, quirting black headed dēmon on a bay that strove gallantly. On the left a gray nose inching ahead and a gray body stretching close to the ground with a rider low on its back while Gray Wonder made the furious, fast striding spurt of the quarter horse at the finish. A nose ahead at five hundred yards, half a length in front across the finish Gray Wonder swept over the line and galloped onward to a halt, while the bay, slowing also, as the race ended, thundered along in the rear.

In an instant both riders were beyond the howling crowd at the finish. As one man both swung from their saddles, and letting their horses go, faced one another, ten feet apart in the greasewood.

"Foul! A foul, yuh damn hellion!" screamed Sims.

"Pay up, yuh dirty ridin' crook!" Pete rapped out. "All I done was even the race!" He raised his voice. "I'm tellin' the range now the crooked stuff yuh did!"

FROM the finish line a crowd was racing toward the two, an angry crowd, bearing the judges along with its rush, howling into the judges' ears that it was a foul—that it wasn't—that it had to be run over—that they'd be damned if it was goin' to be run over!

Yet as the crowd reached the two men standing face to face its impetuous rush slacked and stopped. It milled, uncertain, unwilling to surround the two, for Pete was white with cold anger, while Sims' countenance was purple with murderous fury.

"Fust nose gits the money was your words," said Pete. He spoke to the crowd, but his attention never flickered from Sims. "Reckon we-all kin see why, with the start yuh got an' the way yuh rode. You an' the Box Dot ain't goin' to welch now, after cold deckin' me an' the whole range!"

"Yuh lie!"

"*You* kin pay up an' git, even after that," Pete gritted. The crowd swirled as Jim tried to force his way through, but cool headed men caught the oldtimer by the arms and held him still. The principals were left to finish their quarrel alone.

"I'm just goin' to tell the range your tin-horn tricks," Pete continued grimly. "Hombres, after placin' a small bet, this yere Matt Sims stole my hoss an' raced him by moonlight. I knowed it. I didn't guard my hoss none then, but I watched him close. I seen a bit of sweat on his belly. Then when Sims was plumb shore his bay was faster, he an' the Box Dot come takin' all bets. Didn't they?"

"Yuh lie," croaked Sims.

"The bay waren't faster!" shouted some one in the crowd.

"That's cause I cross shod him so he'd run slow," said Pete grimly. "Reckon you all know me, an' my pap before me. I'm givin' my range word those are the real facts. Sims aimed to take your money on a race that was plumb fixed. He works that way. Only—" Pete paused, and addressed himself altogether to the snarling, purple faced ranchman, "you ain't jest a crook, Sims. You're plumb ignorant of hoss racin'."

"Yuh lie!"

"Third time yuh called me that," Pete snapped. "Better do something about it before I kick yuh off the ranches yuh stole!"

Pete had the bulk of the crowd with him. They wanted their money anyhow, and they wanted it all the harder when they heard Sims had planned to cheat them out of it. The Box Dot was a big outfit, but Sims' punchers were lost in the spectators the race had brought. Sims' fury boiled over. He went for his gun.

The draw was flashing. Too quick almost for the eye to follow. His hand darted to the low swung holster, thumbing back the hammer as he snapped the gun up. Yet Pete, with a gun in his trousers, had three inches less to reach.

The triggerless gun exploded at the flip of his thumb. The roars of the forty-fives blended, but it was the shock of Pete's bullet striking Sims below the heart that lifted the ranchman's thumb from the Colt hammer. He fell backward, while Pete, whirling with gun upraised, cracked down on the Box Dot foreman.

"Do I lie?" he demanded.

Faced by a man who had a cold drop the foreman swallowed and saved his self-respect as best he could.

"Ain't fightin' for no dead boss," he replied lamely. "No, you're tellin' the real facts. I done stole yo' hoss. Sims raced him. The bay beat him a length—"

"Git!" Pete cut in on the recital. "And this time don't reckon to come back, either!"

THE foreman got, and the rest of the Box Dot punchers followed his example. They were a sorry outfit. Jeers pursued them, for several were afoot, having lost their horses. Many had lost their boots. Six-guns, chaps, and spurs were missing, and what was worse, and what caused the jeering was that they weren't simply crooks that had been cleaned. They were ignorant; sifting away shamefaced because a horse had carried a half pound of extra metal on two hoofs.

Behind them, forty men were offering Pete a drink at once. He shook them off, and taking Jim by the arm, headed for the stakeholder.

"Damn it, kid, I couldn't git to help yuh!" growled old Jim irritably. "I knowed a six-gun was the onliest way, an' why yuh didn't use one fust off—"

"Sure! I ain't a tough hombre like you," Pete denied. "He forced that on me, but anyways, we not only got him. We got all his stealings. Wonder where we can find Sloan an' old Taylor?" said the long legged kid thoughtfully. "I want them back, running the ranches they lost, because damned if I'm goin' to keep money I won by matchin' dirty tricks with a skunk. To square things for my sidekicks an' know I own the best quarter hoss in Texas—that's plenty."

The End

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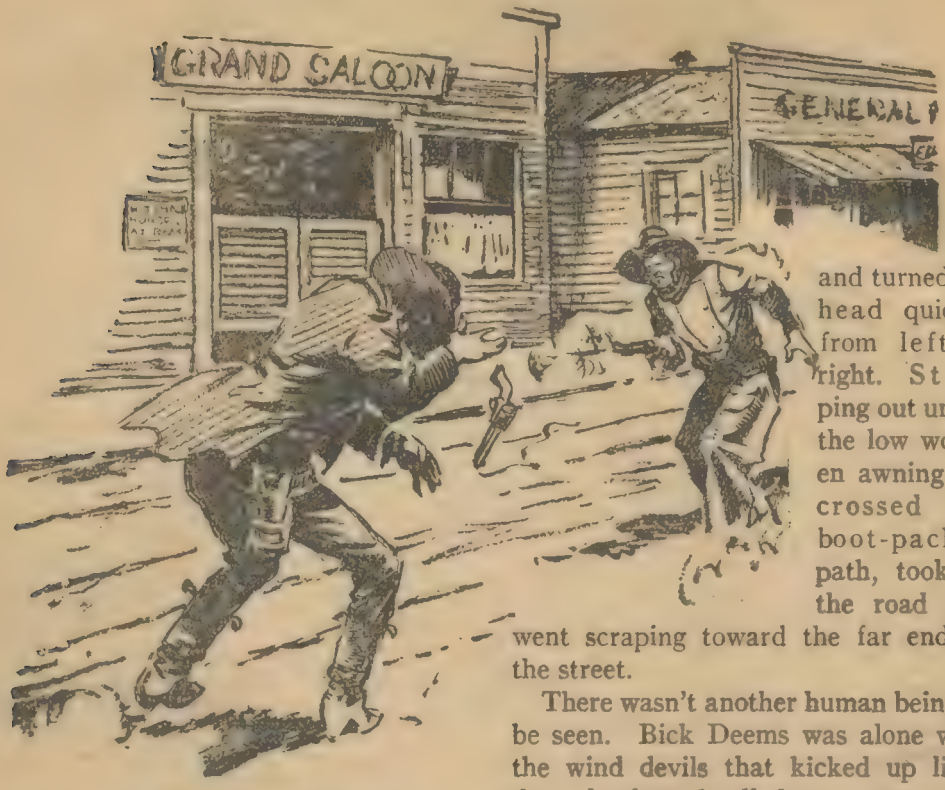


BICK DEEMS had a pistol in his hand when he stepped into the Buckthorn Bar. He swept the place with a glance that cleaned each corner as he motioned for a drink.

Hardwinter Smith said, "Hello, Bick," but offered no further sociability. Deems nodded and trailed his whiskey past-parched tonsils. He used his shirtsleeve to mop drops of cold, sticky perspiration off his face, wiped his damp palms on his pants and got a fresh grip on his gun.

Deems moved to the door, poked the sunburned tip of his nose past the frame and turned his head quickly from left to right. Stepping out under the low wooden awning, he crossed the boot-packed path, took to the road and went scraping toward the far end of the street.

There wasn't another human being to be seen. Bick Deems was alone with the wind devils that kicked up little dust clouds and rolled paper scrap out there.

Hardwinter Smith refilled his glass and observed, "A man never knows when he's well off. A week ago, there was Bick Deems and Sam Hala, living and working together, getting drunk and sobering up together."

The bartender snapped his pink sleeve garters. Hardwinter jerked and slopped part of his drink onto the bar.

"Stop that!" he grumbled. "With Bick Deems and Sam Hala moving around town on a game of seek-and-shoot, I don't want to hear no premature shooting sounds."

Colt-death and a boothill grave awaited the cowman who would keep that Buckthorn date in the dust!

"That's true. Sorry." The bartender searched his brain for a conversational offering. "You figure," he inquired, "the Widow Ames will feel proud toward the gent that's left? I mean, of course—and providing—either Sam or Bick survives."

"What man knows how a woman, 'specially a widow-woman, feels?" Hardwinter sniffed. "The Widow Ames, now, set her cap for Bick Deems, then went after Sam Hala, too. Bick never had paid her much attention, so I never figured *he* cared enough that he'd match pistols and lead on account of her."

Hardwinter eased to the door and sneaked a quick peek along the street. Bick Deems had reached the end of it and had turned and started back.

He leaped and spun half around, now, as he raised his six-gun and ducked off to his left, letting the gun's arched hammer fall from under his restraining thumb.

Sam Hala faded back into the narrow space between the general and hardware stores across the way from Bick Deems, returning a shot that bored a ragged little hole in, and spidered the window of the barber shop.

The street was deserted again. Bick Deems and Sam Hala were shifting positions, and the tense seconds seemed interminable.

SAM HALA'S head, then, was thrust around the corner of the Pie Corral Cafe. The rest of Sam Hala's body showed and the man started maneuvering toward the low gallery in front of the Hostel House.

Bick Deems was hidden across the street, stretched on his stomach opposite Hala's goal. The feed store was behind Deems. Blocks of cattle salt were stacked in front of him, and he squinted at Hala through a crevice in the white bulwark.

Hala moved on with jerky, wary steps, unaware Bick had lined the big front sight of his pistol on the tobacco tag that dangled against the shirt pocket over Hala's thumping heart.

Still Deems did not fire. There was no reason why he shouldn't—because he had out-guessed and positioned the erstwhile partner who was now his sworn and deadly enemy. So it was Deems' right to blaze away right now, rubbing out Hala's mark.

It wasn't quite fitting, though—Deems thought—that Hala be blown from this mortal sphere without a warning he was about to be on his way to "yonderly." Deems drew his legs under him, tensed his muscles and popped up like a lethal Jack-in-the-box calling "Sam!" in a sharp, tense voice.

Sam Hala pressed against the sun-baked wall of the Hostel House, making a fine, large true target Bick Deems could not and did not miss.

Sam shuddered and his pistol exploded as he rose on his toes, elbows crooked, hands dangling limply at the wrists. He twisted sideways as his left knee bent, crashed to earth and rolled over on his back.

The street was instantly swarming with humanity; men that kept respectful silence and distance while Bick Deems walked wearily and without a show of triumph and reached Sam Hala's side.

Hardwinter Smith moved on in when Bick Deems knelt and began tugging at the dead man's boots.

"That's mighty white of you, Bick," said Hardwinter. "Some men got an awful fear of being buried with their boots on."

Bick Deems said, as he removed the second boot, "Uh-huh. But me and Sam once shared our tobacco and bedrolls and likker." He sighed heavily. "It makes me sad, seeing Sam cooling

(Please turn to page 110)

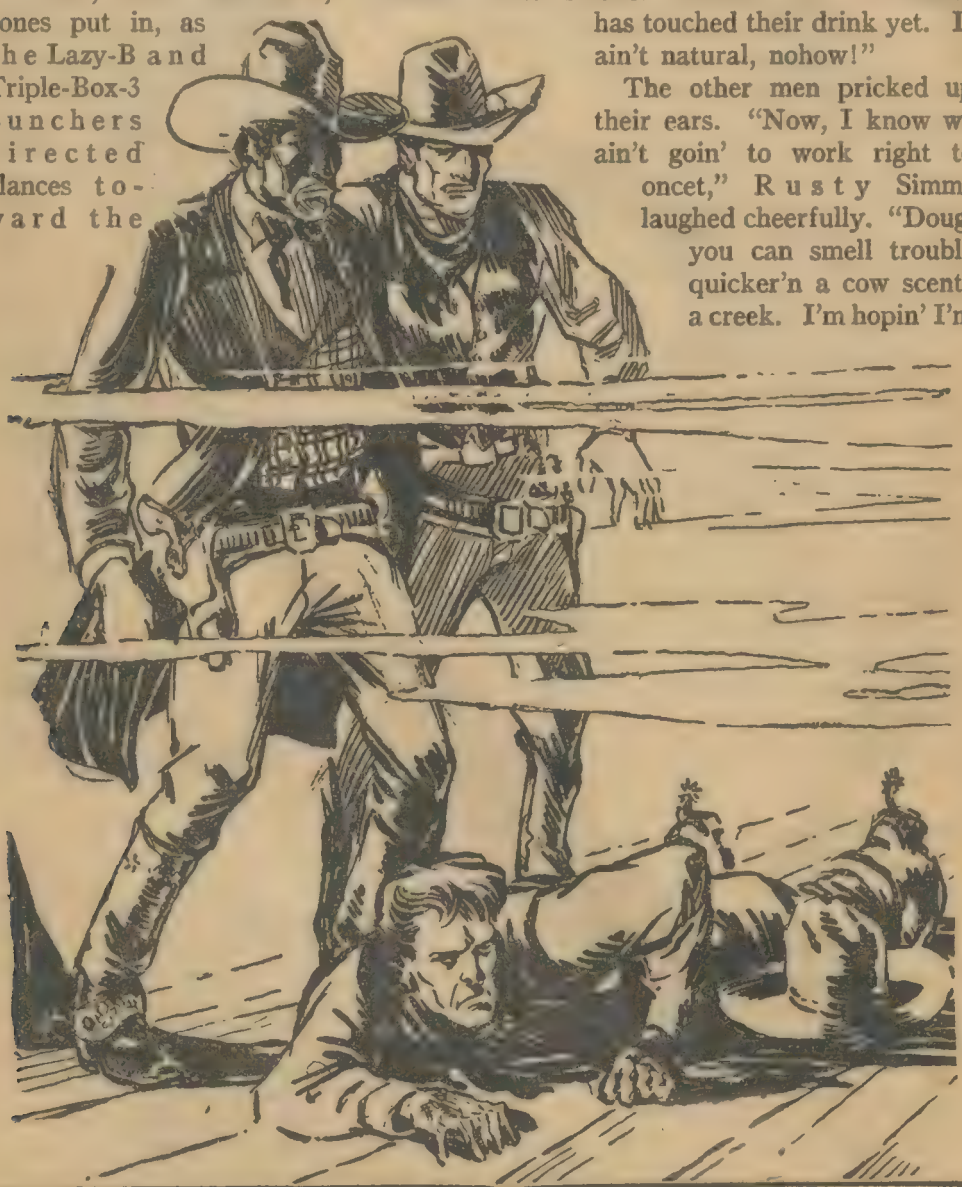
Stampede of the Laramie

DOUG downed his drink, then motioned to Zach Teale and Zeb Baxter seated at a corner table, talking to the stranger who had come in on the Limited. "If I ain't mistaken," he said quietly, "that gray-haired stocky feller over there is Bruce Malcolm from Laramie country. He visited the ranch once when I was a younker . . . friend of Zach's. . . ."

"Yeah, that's who it is," Ananias Jones put in, as the Lazy-B and Triple-Box-3 punchers directed glances toward the three men. "I remember him now. Malcolm's got a pretty fair spread in the Laramie Basin. Runs the Rocking-M brand, as I recollect."

Doug nodded. "That's it. I ain't got the least idea what brought Malcolm here, but I'm bettin' that he didn't come to Los Tayos just to say "hello." They's trouble of some kind on the prod. I can tell it just by lookin' at Zach's face. Neither him nor Baxter has touched their drink yet. It ain't natural, nohow!"

The other men pricked up their ears. "Now, I know we ain't goin' to work right to oncet," Rusty Simms laughed cheerfully. "Doug, you can smell trouble quicker'n a cow scents a creek. I'm hopin' I'm



GREAT BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL OF A HELL-SPAWNED GUN DYNASTY!

Gun Wolves

By KEITH CARLSON

Author of "Gunsmoke," etc.

Devil Doug knew those hell-spawned Laramie gun-slammers would never crawfish—even to a gent who could out-ride, out-shoot, out-fight any man on the range!

in on it, 'at's all!"

"Don't count your ponies before they're foaled, Rusty," Doug advised. "Even if they is trouble in Laramie country, it won't concern us none . . . too far away for us to be mixin' into

anythin'."

"Doug's pro'bly right," Ananias groaned. "We ain't got nothin' ahead but a life of monotony, an' I ain't gettin' excited none. I'm stayin' right at this bar an' drinkin' my likker while they's plenty of it—"

"That's one thing that don't exist," Piute George stated definitely; "plenty of likker."

Before Ananias could answer, there came a hail from Zach Teale to Doug. "Hey, Addle-pate, come over here a minute, will you?"

"Comin', Methuselah, comin'," Doug answered as he left the bar and started across the floor. "Don't get yourself excited, or you're liable to go into a decline."

THAT was their usual manner in addressing each other. Theirs was a strange attachment, and Doug was more of a son to old Zach than he was joint owner of the Triple-Box-3. Both were reluctant to show that any sign of affection existed between them, and they camouflaged this feeling under a continual exchange of epithets. The things they called each other would have made some men fight, but Doug and Zach always accompanied such remarks with a grin of perfect understanding. That was no sign, however, that an outsider could get away with anything similar. Either was quick to resent an insult offered to the other one.

Zach's keen eyes twinkled beneath their snow-white shaggy brows as he grumbled: "Well, don't take all night to get here. We oughta call you snail, from the way you move."

"I'm movin' slow," Doug retorted as he approached, "because I got a feelin' your dumb-headedness is got us into some more trouble."

By this time it was growing dark and the bartender of the Silver Spur moved around lighting the oil-lamps fastened to brackets on the wall.

Doug reached over and took Bruce Malcolm's hand. "How are you, Mr. Malcolm? It's some years since we met. Sorry to find you in such bad company as old Zach here!"

Malcolm smiled as he shook hands, but before he could reply, there came from outside the saloon the bark of a .45. The next instant the swinging doors banged open and a big man in a fringed buckskin suit burst into the room, both hands streaming fire towards the rafters of the building.

"Wow! Yip-yip-p-ee-ee!" he roared. "I'm a wild wolf an' it's my night for huntin' blood!" Again his guns sent a hail of lead thundering into the ceiling.

He paused to reload, while the inmates of the saloon looked on, grinning. Here was one of the strangest sights they'd seen in many a day. In addition to the fringed buckskin suit, the "wild wolf" wore his sombrero turned up in front, in the approved manner of the plainsmen and Indian fighters of a much earlier day. His hair was long and reached to his shoulders, while long drooping mustaches adorned his upper lip. There was something ugly in the quick glance his close-set eyes flashed around the room, and the mustaches failed to conceal the repulsive mouth.

"My Gawd!" old Zach ejaculated in astonishment. "Now where in Hades did *that* come from. He looks like he might be tryin' to imitate a combination of Wild Bill and Deadwood Dick. Drunker'n a hoot-owl, too."

"Maybe he's in some show," Doug grinned. "He ain't no regular cowboy."

Another shot rang out and again lead tore skyward. "Try and stop me, boys, I'm wild, I am! Ain't never been curried! Wow!" yelled he of the buckskin suit. Suddenly his hands dropped to waist level, guns covering the room. "Up with 'em, yuh sheepherders!

They's a snake in this room what's called Devil Doug, an' I aims to make a little Hell for him right now!"

There was nothing else to do. So quickly had the man's manner changed from drunken boisterousness to murderous hate that everyone was caught off guard. The stranger's guns were menacing, and slowly the hands of every man in the room raised in the air.

CHAPTER II

Doug Turns Tonsorial Artist

CAME a breathless silence as the man moved his guns in a half-circle before him. "Don't any man move," he warned viciously. "I'm shootin' on the least excuse, an' Wild Bill Hatcher don't miss. You, cowboy"—he motioned to Steve Billings, one of the Lazy-B men—"collect their hardware."

"You can go plumb to hell!" Billings snapped defiantly.

Wild Bill Hatcher pressed trigger, the gun roared, and a small round hole appeared suddenly in Billings' sombrero. "Don't tell me what you won't do," Hatcher gritted savagely. "Get movin' now, or I'm shootin' lower next time."

"You better do what he says, Steve," Doug advised calmly. "He's got the bulge on us."

Hatcher laughed harshly. "I see one of you yeller snakes has got some sense, anyway." Then to Billings, "Go on, get movin'."

Without further objections, Billings did as he was ordered. While the guns were being collected and placed in a big pile at one end of a bar, Doug watched coolly for an opportunity to break up Hatcher's game. He was wondering what Hatcher had against him. He'd never seen the man before.

"Now, you yeller-bellies, move over against the wall," Hatcher ordered next.

The men in the room silently complied. Doug, as he moved back with the rest, knew they were all looking to him and would back him up at the first hint of action.

Hatcher laughed scornfully. "You're sure a tame-actin' bunch of babies," he sneered. "Not one of you got the guts to call me an' see if I'm bluffin'. Well, I ain't bluffin'. I'm here to see this little tin-god on wheels what's called Devil Doug. Is he here?"

Doug spoke over his shoulder to his own crowd. "Leave this to me. Seems like it's my fight." Then he stepped out to the center of the floor a few yards away from Wild Bill Hatcher. His hands were still in the air. "I'm Doug Fraser," he announced calmly.

He wasn't the rangy type—about five foot, eight—but every ounce of his hundred-sixty-odd pounds was sheer fighting weight. When he moved, his muscles rippled with all the grace of a puma. His movements were, to all appearances, unhurried, deliberate, but somehow he always managed to be there in a pinch.

Not for nothing had he gained the name "Devil Doug." There wasn't a man on the range who could out-shoot, out-ride, or out-fight Doug Fraser. And yet he wasn't the quarrelsome sort.

Keen gray eyes and a firm chin and mouth gave an impression of attractiveness. Doug wasn't what you'd call handsome; his features were too rugged for that, but there was something likeable in his frank, candid glance just the same.

His attire wasn't different from that of any other man on the range—gray shirt with black stripes, high-heeled riding boots, faded blue overalls with wide, rolled-up cuffs. . . . Two cartridge belts criss-crossed at his hips, each car-

rying its holster and Colt forty-five.

Hatcher's gun barrel tilted a fraction, then lowered again as he eyed Doug malevolently. "So you're Fraser, are you?" he rasped. "Hell, I don't know how you ever got that name for bein' such a devil. You look plenty peaceful t' me, now. In fact, you look scared to death. Not used to lookin' into a gun-barrel when a man's holdin' it, I reckon."

Doug laughed contemptuously. "I don't know who you are, feller, but you look like a big joke to me. Who dressed you up in them wild-west clothes? I don't like the way you wear your hair, neither. They ain't no sense havin' it long thataway. It don't cover no brains. Even your face looks funny with them two bronc tails a-growin' on your upper lip—"

A LURID string of curses cut him short. "That'll do. For two cents I'd fill you fulla lead. Hey, keep them hands up."

"I wasn't goin' for no gun," Doug grinned. "I was only reachin' to get the two cents. It's worth that to see you try. What do you want, anyway? You better state your business an' then move on before I take your guns away an' boot you outta town—"

"You'll what?" Hatcher looked at him, wide-eyed with astonishment. "Say, feller, you can't kid me. I reckon to teach you a lesson for bein' so smart. Get busy an' do a dance for us. . . ."

One of his guns cracked out and a piece of lead tore into the floor at Doug's feet. "Damn you, dance!" Hatcher roared. "Lift them dogs!" Two more bullets ripped into the pine planking near Doug's toes.

Doug hadn't moved as yet. Now he laughed grimly. "Want me to do a little dance for you, eh? Well, I always start my dances with a little kick . . . like this!"

As the words left his lips, he suddenly leaped forward. Too late, Hatcher saw his mistake. He lifted his guns and pulled trigger, but Doug was coming too fast. Both bullets flew wild. At the same instant, Doug kicked. His boot toe came up with astonishing speed and violence, catching Hatcher square on the chin. Over went the big bully with a heavy crash to the floor, both of his guns slipping from his hands.

The crowd swarmed forward in a rush and got their guns from the bar. Then they turned to Doug who had grasped Hatcher by the throat and was pulling him to his feet. The man's eyes were glassy. The kick on the jaw had rendered him unconscious.

Doug shook him violently, then called to the bartender for a glass of water. This he dashed into the unconscious man's face. Hatcher moved his head, sputtered, and sank down again.

"I reckon some theatre's goin' to be without its badman tonight," Doug grinned, as he took his guns which "Mac" MacCrimmon, his foreman and bosom pal, brought him. "Now, where in the name of the seven bald steers do you suppose this galoot come from? He seemed to have it in for me for some reason or other. Let's bring him around an' see what he's got to say for hisself."

Everyone was talking at once now. Feeling ran high against the badman, and there were two or three in the Silver Spur who voiced intentions of carrying to a conclusion the work Doug had commenced. Doug managed to "kid" them out of that idea, while he and MacCrimmon worked over the recumbent Hatcher. It took them fully fifteen minutes to bring him to his senses again.

Finally Hatcher opened his eyes and sat up. "Say, fellers," he mumbled thickly, "what caused the explosion?"

The sudden burst of laughter that greeted the question helped Hatcher re-

gain his scattered wits. His eyes roamed wildly about the room for a moment; then they widened with fear as they fell on Doug's face. In that moment he remembered what had happened.

"C'mon, Little Wildflower Bill," Doug ordered, again jerking Hatcher to his feet. "Tell us what was the idea."

"I don't know what you're talkin' about, Mister," Hatcher answered, not meeting Doug's eyes. "Seems like you'n' me had some trouble, but it musta been my fault. I never saw you before. I been drinkin' too much. Me, I'm apologizin' for anythin' I mighta done. I'll be goin' along now."

"You're damn-hoopin' right you'll be goin' along," Doug snapped. "You ain't wanted in Los Tayos nohow. I don't know what you come here for, nor where from, but it's a cinch you ain't had no success in your business. You was drinkin', all right, but you wasn't so drunk you didn't know what you was doin'. I think you're a liar seven ways from the clock, but I'm givin' you your chance. Here's your guns. Put 'em in your holsters an' step! If you ever pull 'em again when I'm around, I'll jam 'em down your dirty throat. Now, move!"

Doug twisted Hatcher about, and, putting his foot against Hatcher's posterior, straightened his leg suddenly and with much force. Hatcher went forward as though shot out of a cannon, stumbled, regained his footing and headed hastily for the door.

HE was almost there when Doug's hand moved to holster. The gun cracked out, and a lock of Hatcher's long hair fell to the ground. The man stopped and half-turned. Again the gun roared and a second lock of hair was cut loose.

"That's right, Wild Bill," Doug yelled gleefully. "Keep turnin' an' I'll give you as fine a hair-cut as you'd want to see." His gun roared again; more hair floated downward. "Nope, don't go for your guns," Doug warned easily. "You might make me nervous an' spoil my aim. Just you keep a-turnin' " . . . *crack!* . . . "you're doin' fine" . . . *crack!* . . . "I reckon I'll have to" . . . *crack!* . . . "open a" . . . *crack!* . . . "barber shop." . . . *crack!* . . . "Will you have" . . . *crack!* . . . "a shave or massage, sir?" . . . *crack!* . . .

And so it went. Slowly as the man revolved at Doug's order, his face terror-stricken, Doug shot off lock after lock of the long hair. When one gun had been emptied, he reached for the other, shooting easily from the hip with no apparent effort or aim, keeping up a running fire of comment the while. MacCrimmon had kept count of the shots, and when Doug's lead was exhausted, quickly thrust his own weapon into Doug's hand. The crowd was quick to catch the idea, and guns were proffered faster than Doug could use them.

The room was roaring with laughter at the ludicrous spectacle afforded by Hatcher. Twice the would-be badman had made as if to run, but each time the breeze of Doug's bullet, as it cut through his hair, persuaded him to change his mind. In the space of a minute, he had swung completely around several times at Doug's order. Finally, when he stood still in the circle of shorn hair spread at his feet, the hair-cut was finished. Around his head, beneath the crown of his sombrero, ran an almost straight ridge where the hair had been clipped off.

"I sure did mess that up a mite," Doug observed seriously. "Kinda ragged in one place. It wasn't my fault, Wildflower Bill. You musta shifted your weight too sudden or somethin'. I wonder what we can do to trim that up? Don't you move none until I decide."

Men were rolling against the bar, holding their sides, purple-faced with merriment. Old Zach was coughing and choking, while Zeb Baxter pounded him on the back. The whole room was in an uproar.

"Oh, you Delilah," MacCrimmon yelled enthusiastically. "You're there, cowboy, when it comes to shearin' Wildflower Samson of his locks. You sure took his strength away, too. Look, he's shakin' all over! Too weak to move!"

The laugh wrinkles at the corners of Doug's eyes were twitching, but his face was grave. "As a hair-cut what do you think of it, fellers?" he asked soberly, turning to the crowd.

"Make him take his hat off," somebody yelled, "so's we can judge proper."

"Take off the hat," Doug ordered.

THE room fell into silence as Hatcher, his face working with mingled hate and fear, removed the sombrero. Then came another roar of laughter.

"Oh! Oh!" Rusty Simms gurgled, bent nearly double.

"He . . . he looks . . . like one of . . . these little Dutch Boy advertisin' signs," Piute George gasped.

Ananias was finding it difficult to speak. "Now if we only had a pair of them little blue panties to put on him," he choked out, "we could . . ." Unable to finish, he went off into spasms of laughter.

"I'm plumb regretful 'bout leavin' that bunch of hair ragged like that," Doug was saying ruefully, eyeing the haircut with the eye of an artist. "I don't know just how to fix it up."

Suddenly his face brightened. "I got it!" he exclaimed, slapping his leg. "I won't try to trim it no evener. We'll take more off. Now, if any of you fellers know where they's a good pair of horse-clippers—"

He got no further. The men caught the idea and, with whoops of joy, charged down on Hatcher. In a moment they were bearing his struggling figure in the direction of the livery stable.

Doug followed them to the door. "If you can locate some sheep-dip," he yelled after the men, "you better give Hatcher a little hair tonic, too. He's probably got dandruff!"

CHAPTER III

Doug to the Rescue

EXCEPTING for Teale, Baxter and Bruce Malcolm, the room was empty when Doug turned back from the door. He was laughing heartily now. Even Ike, the bartender, had followed the hooting, jeering men out into the street. He knew there'd be no drinks to be served until Hatcher had been disposed of.

The three men at the table were still shaking, faces red. Doug crossed the floor and dropped into a chair at the table where they had once more seated themselves.

"Well, Lame-brain," Old Zach laughed, "ye was lucky gettin' outten that scrape so easy."

"Lucky, nothin', you moth-eaten ol' mossback," Doug grinned. "That was headwork. I was lookin' for you to help me out, but as usual I s'pose you was hidin' under the table."

"It was *headwork*, all right," roared Baxter, the chair creaking from the shaking of his sturdy form, "only it was Hatcher's head you was usin'."

A puzzled look crept into Doug's eyes. "What I don't understand," he declared, "is why Hatcher picked on me. I never done nothin' to him."

Bruce Malcolm cleared his throat, started to speak, then stopped. Finally he said, "Maybe I can explain it, Doug.

This Wild Bill Hatcher, as he calls himself, hails from Laramie—"

"You don't mean to tell me," Doug interrupted, "that that dressed-up poor imitation of a badman punches cows down in your country!"

"No, Hatcher don't work for any of the outfits down my way," Malcolm continued. "Fact is, I don't know what he does for a livin'. He jest hangs around Laramie, drinkin' an' gettin' in gunfights. He's got everybody bluffed, too, seems like. You made him look like a monkey a few minutes back, Doug, but that was because your looks deceived him an' he got careless.

"He's got a reputation for bein' a tough customer, an' I gotta admit he backs that rep up. He claims to be the last of the old plainsmen, but that's a lie. He ain't old enough to ever have figgered much in them days. He's nigh as fast with his guns as the old-timers, though. He says to me one day, he says, 'Malcolm, if they hadn't been a Wild Bill Hickok, I'd 'a' been him!'

"From that time on he begins callin' hisself Wild Bill. I never argued the point with him, 'cause I don't throw lead in the same class he does, but just the same, Hatcher is a livin' insult to the men what fit the redskins an' settled this country in the old days. Don't underestimate him none, Doug, 'cause he ain't through with you yet. You got a job on your hands."

Doug shrugged his broad shoulders. "My guns'll be ready for him if he wants to see 'em. Just the same, I ain't understandin' what he come all the way from Laramie to mix with me for."

"I reckon I'm partly to blame for that," Malcolm answered slowly. "You see it's like this." He paused a moment and then went on:

"I better start from the beginnin'. I come here to Los Tayos to see Zach. I need help an' I need it bad. They's a crew of rustlers over in the Laramie country, an' unless somebody puts a stop to 'em, I stand to be wiped outta my ranch. Zach an' me been friends for years now, an' he never fails to mention you in his letters. Tells me you're a fightin' fool, an' a lot more like that—"

Doug blushed. "You don't want to pay no attention to what ol' Flannelmouth tells you. He's always gettin' drunk an' runnin' off at the head."

Zach Teale nodded regretfully. "For once, Doug, you spoke truth. I was a reg'lar damn liar when I wrote them letters."

MALCOLM smiled at the exchange and continued: "To cut a long story short, them rustlers has got to be caught. Zach suggested that jobs like that was right in your line. He said he'd come over and help me, if you wouldn't."

Doug's forehead creased to a frown as he twisted a brown paper cigarette. He touched a match to it, exhaled sharp twin jets of gray smoke through his nostrils and then spoke: "Why, to tell the truth, Mr. Malcolm, I don't know what to say. We got beef round-up ahead of us, an' Laramie is quite some distance away from here. Seems kinda funny . . . ain't they *no one* in your state able to cope with the rustlers? Don't seem to me it would be necessary to come all the way to Los Tayos for help. Not that we object to givin' you aid," he hastened to add, "only it seems queer-like . . ." The words trailed off.

Malcolm nodded agreement with the statement. "I know it looks queer to you; damn queer. You see, it's this way. Things has come to a pass around Laramie where we don't know who we can trust. I'm even beginnin' to doubt our sheriff. He's always been a pretty good man, but it don't seem like he exerts hisself to catch th' rustlers. In fact, they's only one man in

that whole country there I can trust—"

At that moment they were interrupted by the appearance of Rusty Simms. He came through the door, grinned at the four men, then commenced to rake into his sombrero the locks of Hatcher's hair which lay scattered about the floor. That completed, he looked up, again grinned, and vanished through the door.

"I'd sure hate to be Hatcher about now," Doug chuckled. "Them boys is up to some devilin' . . . But you was sayin', Mr. Malcolm, that they's only one man in Laramie you could trust. Who is he?"

"Dell Turner. He's got the spread nearest mine. Dell an' me has been friends for years, so I know he's all right."

"Uh-huh. Probably so. Has Turner lost any cattle?"

"Lost cattle? Hell! We've all been losin' stock, but Turner's had more stolen than anybody else! It was to him that I suggested importin' some outside help to look into things. He asked if I had anybody in mind, an' I mentioned you. He asked a few questions, then said you looked right good to him. It was five days ago I talked the matter over with him, but we didn't say nothin' to the other ranchers, figgerin' the less said, the more chance an outside man would have."

"Good idea, but I reckon somebody musta overheard you talkin'," Doug observed slowly. "I can understand now what Hatcher come to Los Tayos for. Ten to one he's mixed in with th' rustlers, heard what you an' Turner was plannin', an' then come here to persuade me not to leave Los Tayos. Who does Hatcher run with?"

"Nobody in particular. Mebbe he's one of the rustlers; I don't know. All we do know is that they's a band of masked riders plumb active in our vicinity—"

"Masked riders?" Doug's lifted eyebrows expressed surprise.

Malcolm nodded. "Yep, the band has been seen once or twice, but the fellers what seen them was all alone, an' couldn't put up no fight against 'em. . . ."

The men talked a while longer. Much as Doug wanted to satisfy Malcolm, he felt it his duty to take care of his own work first.

Suddenly from outside the door came the footsteps of laughing men. In a moment the Triple-Box-3 and Lazy-B punchers burst into the saloon. Hatcher wasn't with them this time.

"Wow!" MacCrimmon exulted. "That Hatcher is one mad hombre!"

"What did you do to Wildflower Bill?" Doug asked.

"We found some sheep-dip an' give him a shampoo like you suggested," MacCrimmon laughed. "That was after we clipped *all* his hair off."

"An' then," Rusty Simms added, "Piute George had an idea. That's unusual for George, but miracles will happen. George proposes that we cut off one of them long mustaches of Hatcher's. Which same we done—"

"An' then Ananias took some axle-grease," Trigger Skelly put in, "an' we waxed the end of the other mustache till it stuck out stiff as a steer's horn."

"It wasn't good axle-grease a-tall," Ananias explained ruefully. "I had to mix some glue with it, so's th' mustache would dry stiff!"

THE room was again in an uproar. "What did you come back to get that hair for?" Doug asked Rusty.

"Well, seein' that glue give us another idea," Rusty grinned, "so we stuck some of the hair back on Hatcher's haid. We made one of them goatees for his chin, too. It took nearly the whole of us to hold him while we was doin' it. Gosh! how he did kick!"

"Finally we put him in the saddle an' started him outta town," Ananias said, "but I bet he won't leave that saddle in a hurry. Yuh see, I had some glue left over, an' not wantin' to be wasteful, we spread it around easy-like on his rig!"

It was some time before the laughter died down. Bruce Malcolm sobered first, and a look of concern crept into his face. By this time the punchers were again working Ike into a sweat at the bar, and the four men resumed their conversation.

"I tell you, Doug," Malcolm declared gravely, "you're underestimatin' Hatcher. He's *bad*, an' he won't forget this night until him or you is dead. You've made an enemy what don't forget."

Doug pretended concern. "Do you really think he'll hold this against me, Mr. Malcolm?"

"They ain't no two ways about it," Malcolm replied. "I'm plumb sorry, Doug, but I reckon my affairs has let you in for some trouble. Now that Hatcher knows who you are, I'm withdrawin' my offer for help. You stay here an' tend to your own duties—"

That was as far as he got. Doug was grinning now, eyes shining with an unholy love of battle. "You're withdrawin' nothin'," he drawled. "Me, I'm headin' for Laramie, providin' Zach can take care of th' round-up. How about it, you broken-down ol' camel?"

Zach snorted. "Broken down ol' camel, is ut? Huh! Thank Gawd, I won't have you gettin' under my feet for awhile. Round-up is goin' to be finished up neat an' speedy for the first time since the Triple-Box-3 made the mistake of takin' you in as a pardner. You'll pro'bly fall off'n your horse so often you won't be no help in Laramie, but if Malcolm thinks you can help, go ahead. I'll be glad to get rid of you fer a spell!"

"I'll be takin' the pick of the outfit with me," warned Doug. "You'll be short-handed."

"Short-handed, yore granny!" Zach sniffed. "Havin' you away will be just the same as puttin' on ten extra hands!"

"Well, that's settled," Doug grinned widely. "Mr. Baxter'll probably help you, an' you can hire five or six top-hands to take my place. Anyway, I'll probably be back before you get started—"

Malcolm looked relieved. "I'm sure enough grateful to you all," he commenced awkwardly, "an' mebbe some day—"

Zeb Baxter saw his embarrassment and cut in. "Who yuh takin', Doug? Yuh can have any of my boys." Baxter was owner of the Lazy-B.

"Thanks, Mr. Baxter. I reckon I better leave as many here as possible, if you're goin' to help Zach." He turned to the men at the bar. "Mac, Skelly, Ananias, George, Rusty . . . come here a minute, will you?"

In another moment the five stood at his side, curiosity plain on their features. Doug introduced Malcolm and explained briefly the situation. "We'll be stayin' in town to-night—catchin' the rattler for Laramie in the mornin'. Remember, we're travelin' light and fast. Don't take anythin' you ain't sure you'll need. I wish we could go over to Laramie 'thout anybody knowin' who we are, but they know we're comin'; in fact, they're expectin' us. It's a game where the fastest guns will win. . . ."

He paused a moment, a graver note entering his tones. "It's quite probable, cowboys, that all of us won't be comin' back. . . . If any of you don't want to make the trip, say so. I won't hold it against you. You ain't hired to take up another man's fight."

DOUG looked quickly from one to the other, but saw nothing but loyalty in their eyes. His voice softened. "It

sure looks like you was backin' me up till Hell freezes over."

"An' even then, Doug," MacCrimmon drawled, speaking for the others, "we'll be stickin' around to help you cut some ice."

Zach Teale looked proudly at his men, then at Bruce Malcolm. "Ain't I allus told ye, Malcolm, that I had the fightenest bunch of punchers in th' hull Rio Grandy country?" He raised his long spare form from the chair and headed for the bar.

"Barkeep," he ordered, "pull the corks on two or three bottles of that choice Bourbon ye got put away fer me. We're drinkin' to Devil Doug an' his fightin' demons!" And then to Doug in a stage whisper that all could hear, "I only said that, Empty-head, so's to bolster up yore spirits a mite. Ye're shakin' now like a calf with a hot iron to his hide."

CHAPTER IV

Ananias Spins a Windy

SIX cowboys trudged in the gray light of early morn down the main street of Los Tayos. Each carried his saddle and a burlap sack containing guns, a few necessary articles of clothing and other odds and ends. Cigarette ends burned ceaselessly, but no one spoke until the little band had reached the raised dirt platform with its small ticket-office shanty. Here they slowed pace—all but Doug Fraser.

"Ain't you awake yet?" Ananias asked in surprise. "Here's the station."

"Yeah, I'm awake," Doug laughed, "but you ain't or you'd know they ain't no train stops here at this hour. C'mon, keep movin', cowboy."

"Well, what th'——"

"We're goin' to walk to Laramie, I'll betcha," chuckled MacCrimmon.

The men looked questioningly at Doug as they again fell into step at his side. Doug felt it was time to explain. "It's this way, fellers; they's certain folks in Laramie what are expectin' us. We'll be that much ahead if they don't know when we get there, *sabe?*"

"An' by th' time we do arrive," Rusty Simms put in, "them folks will be thinkin' we got th' hoof-an'-mouth disease, what with you talkin' an' us walkin'!"

Doug sighed with pretended disgust. "Have you fellers forgot that fast freight that stops at Squaw Creek to take on water? We'll catch that to Laramie. Hatcher's ridin' his horse, so we'll beat him there. Malcolm will be along on the Limited sometime to-night around twelve. That'll give us a few hours to look around town without bein' in his company——"

"Did you say we was *walkin'* to Squaw Creek?" Piute George groaned.

To have heard the men grumble, one would have thought Squaw Creek was some distance away. As a matter of fact, it was less than a quarter-mile outside of town. But then no self-respecting puncher likes to walk. Doug grinned inwardly. If they hadn't voiced objections, he'd have thought something was wrong. Now he knew that the morale of his outfit was all that it should be.

By this time they had passed the last house on the edge of town, and were picking their way along the rough road that spread out across the range. Within ten minutes the designated spot was reached, and with groans of relief the men dropped their war-bags to the ground. Even then the rails were humming with the vibrations of the approaching train.

A few minutes more and it had snorted up. Doug, followed by his punchers, swung aboard the caboose before it came to a full stop, just as the

brakeman swung off on the opposite side. . . .

The freight conductor got the surprise of his life as he appeared in the doorway, only to be nearly knocked from his feet as the Triple-Box-3 men crowded through the door.

"What—what is this?" he stammered. "A hold-up . . ." Then recognizing Doug, "Oh, it's you, eh, Fraser? What's the idea?"

Doug laughed. "Got room for us, Dan? We're headed for Laramie."

The man's features relaxed. "Sure, we got room for you. I don't understand it, though. Why don't you take the passenger? This isn't regular——"

"Did you ever know me to do anything regular?" Doug drawled. "We ain't got no time to lose, an' we aims to get there as soon as can be. Couldn't wait for the Limited. We'll pay you reg'lar fares."

"Aw, who said anything about fares," the conductor growled. "You're welcome and you know it. I guess the railroad company owes you something, anyway. It hasn't forgotten that express-holdup you prevented. . . ."

By this time the punchers were spread along the cushioned seat that ran the length of the caboose. In a few moments, the train was again under way. The conductor settled down at his desk, after inviting the men to make themselves comfortable. By this time it was full daylight.

An hour passed while the train rushed along over the flat, sage-dotted spread of sand and alkali. Rusty Simms was sleeping in one corner, his head jerking with the jolting of the train. The rest of the men sat and talked, smoking countless cigarettes the while. Doug was apart from the group, his mind more on "his girl" than on the business at hand. She was Zeb Baxter's daughter, her name was Ann, and right now she was at school in the East. The past summer she'd brought a friend home with her, Isabel Stevens, and Mac MacCrimmon had fallen for *her*. . . .

OCCASIONALLY the train made short stops at necessary points; then quickly got under way again. Time dragged along. Rusty awoke from his nap and got the rest of the crowd interested in a game of poker. The brakeman was invited in, and soon learned he was no match for these crafty sons of the range. The stakes were small, though, so no great damage was worked.

The hours drifted along to midday. The poker game broke up, leaving the brakeman a sadder but wiser man. Lunches were produced. Some of the men looked over their war-bags, or oiled and cleaned guns that already worked with the smoothness of efficiency.

Still the train rushed on across the flat, changeless, unending stretch of country. Piute George and Skelly were engaged in an argument regarding the relative merits of Sharps and Winchester rifles. That ended, with each man still convinced that his own favorite was best, when Ananias started one of his ever-ready stories.

Ananias, by common consent, was acknowledged to be the raconteur supreme of the Triple-Box-3 and he always gained everybody's attention. His stories were wild, exaggerated accounts of his experiences during a double-score of years on the range. All the boys knew Ananias was a first-class liar when it came to spinning windies; but nevertheless, they looked on his fertile imagination as a gift from the gods and one not to be ignored.

The sun was high now, throwing down its merciless rays and making a regular bake-oven of the small caboose. The heat, combined with the smoke of cigarettes, made the air almost unbearable. Doug was glad that Ananias was

there to help the boys pass the time. A short time later, Ananias' story was brought to an end in a gale of laughter.

For a time silence reigned, broken only by the noise of the speeding freight. "Cowboys, it's hot," Rusty ventured at last, wiping his forehead and casting an inquiring eye at Ananias.

"Shucks!" Ananias retorted. "You fellers don't know what heat is. This ain't hot. Me, I'm as cool as a cowcumber!"

MacCrimmon laughed. "Ananias, you ol' pie-eyed liar," he laughed, "if you have ever been in a hotter section of this country, I craves to hear about it."

"There you go," Ananias answered in hurt tones, "callin' me a liar, Mac. That's th' way with you young squirts. Ain't dry behind th' ears yet, but jest th' same, ye think ye're wiser'n all get out."

"Me, I'm backin' up Mac," Doug put in. "I'm claimin' they ain't no hotter climate in these Benighted States than what's found down here. If you know of a hotter, I wanta hear about it."

"Wal," Ananias commenced, "I'm a-goin' to tell you boys somethin' that'll prove ye don't know it all. It was back in '89 I was prospectin' th' Morlava Desert with ol' Dad Burstedt. We was——"

"What desert?" interrupted Skelly. "Morlava? I never heard of it. Where's it lay?"

"Th' Morlava is spread over th' southwest part of th' State of Artexico," Ananias explained defiantly, as though daring his audience to contradict him.

"They ain't no such state," Piute George stated definitely. "I never heard of no Artexico——"

"If th' things you never heard of was made into a herd, Gawge," Ananias retorted sarcastically, "an' you could finally get hold on it, you would be th' biggest cattle owner in th' cow country! Now if you fellers don't want to hear this story say so. . . ." Ananias never could be pinned down to definite locations. "The Morlava Desert is in the State of Artexico! Now, am I a liar or ain't I?"

"Don't pay no attention to these buckle-necked sheepherders, Ananias," Rusty defended. "Go on with your story. All us fellers know you wouldn't tell a lie—only it's a habit you can't break!"

Ananias cast a reproachful glance at Rusty, and continued. "This here Morlava Desert is all sand an' rocks—like any other desert. They's a heap of gold there, though, if a feller can stand the heat long enough to get it out. Wal, ol' Dad Burstedt an' me was havin' a run of hard luck that summer, th' heat bein' unusual bad. I 'member one mornin' our pack animals went crazy with the heat an' runned off with all our grub.

"They was nothin' left to do but walk over them hot sands, carryin' what tools an' sech as wasn't packed on the mules. Every step we took was like walkin' on hot coals. I'd crossed burnin' sands before, but never nothin' like that! Our boots caught fire every once in a while. Finally all the nails melted outta my boots an' the soles come off. Lucky for me my feet were well calloused!

"It was so dad busted hot that the rocks was all a-smokin' like they'd burst into flame any minute. The handles had all burned off'n our picks an' shovels early in the mornin', before the sun was even up. That'll give ye some idea how hot it was——"

"After that you couldn't have the pick of the prospectin' eh, Ananias?"

ANANIAS glared disgustedly at the speaker. "If thet's meant fer a joke, it's a mighty pore one, Rusty," he growled. He continued his story, while the rest of the crowd listened, grave-faced.

"Come noon, it gets hotter an' hotter, an' th' heat waves was a-raisin' t' beat all. 'Way up in the sky we could see the buzzards a-ridin' them heat-waves, jest like I've seen gulls a-ridin' th' ocean waves out on th' coast. Them buzzards wasn't movin' a-tall. They was jest settin' thar with their wings folded, restin' easy on them waves.

"We was lookin' up watchin' them stink-birds when, a coupla miles farther up, I sees a flock of duck on their way down to th' Gulf of Mexico. Seein' them duck made my mouth water an' reminded me it was gettin' round towards dinner time. Ol' Dad musta been feelin' hungry, too, 'cause he ups with his rifle an' blazes away at 'em. Dad never was much of a shot, though, an' he missed 'em completely.

"He goes to shove another ca'tridge in his gun, an'—bang!—th' ca'tridge explodes right in his hand. It was th' heat done it. As long as them ca'tridges was protected by his belt-loops they was kinda sheltered, but th' minute he exposes 'em to th' sun they discharged themselves! Lucky my gun was all loaded, so I ups an' drawed a bead on a coupla them mallard.

"I pulled the trigger twice, an' at first I was afraid I'd missed or that the leads had melted before they reached a mark. But no, I sees two of them duck falter in their stride, then they stops an' commences tumblin' head over heels down to th' ground. They was so high that it took 'bout twenty minutes fer 'em to land, but when we picked 'em up, I discovered my bullets had gone right through their hearts——"

"Wow! Cowboy," from MacCrimmon, "that was some shootin'."

Ananias shook his head. "Nope, not so good," he denied modestly. "Fact is, I was kinda disappointed. Y' see, I'd aimed at their eyes! You probably won't believe it, but the truth is them ducks had fell so far an' so fast that when they landed all the feathers had been stripped off'n 'em by the rush of wind. We didn't have to cook 'em, nuther. The heat had done that on the way down. Thar they was, all browned to a turn. The tips of the wings was even crisped a mite, if I remember correct. Them birds sure tasted good even if we didn't have nothin' to wash 'em down with, bein' as all the water had boiled outten our canteens!"

Ananias paused a moment to let that sink in, and Piute George said: "But how about the gold, Ananias? Did you find any?"

Ananias nodded reminiscently. "Yeah, we did, but now comes the saddest part of the story. We got through that day alive much to our surprise. Night come, but it didn't cool off enough to make the sand comfortable to sleep on. Well, we starts scoopin' out some sand figgerin' it 'u'd be cooler under the ground a mite.

"The first thing I knowed we struck somethin' hard. There was the gold, boys! Millions of dollars in nuggets. No crushin' of ore necessary. Free gold. We forgot our sufferin' in our excitement, an' set to work to get them nuggets out. Well, the moon come up full that night, makin' everythin' as bright as day, an' we worked till dawn. It was fine workin', too. We didn't even sweat, bein' as all the sweat had been drained outta our bodies durin' the day. Come mornin' we had a pile of nuggets as high as a bronc's head."

"Gosh, Ananias," Skelly exclaimed in assumed awe. "You two fellers musta been as rich as this Midas hombre what the books tell about!"

"NOPE," came the mournful answer, "we never got to take that gold out. While we stood there lookin' at our pile of nuggets, the sun come up, an' we sees it was goin' to be as hot as the day before. First thing I noticed

was somethin' movin' on our pile of gold. I didn't realize what it was at first, then it come to me. *The sun was meltin' thet gold!* Before ye could count to a hundred, all thet gold had melted an' trickled down into the sand. It plumb disappeared right before our eyes!"

"My gosh!" Doug exclaimed sympathetically. "That was sure hard luck. Why didn't you wait until night, dig it up again, an' then tote it out while it was cooler?"

"Exactly what we figgered on doin'," Ananias declared, "but it couldn't be done. Thet gold had hardly sunk into the sand when I sees a sort of yellow vapor risin' up from the ground. Would you believe it, the sun no sooner turned thet gold to liquid than it commenced drawin' it up into the air, just like it does the water in a mud puddle! There we were, nothin' to do but watch our fortune goin' up to Heaven in a kind of golden stream."

Ananias pretended to wipe away a tear. "I tell you, boys, it was tough arter all Dad Burstedt an' me had been through. It just broke Dad's heart an' he didn't try to resist the heat no longer. I looked at him, an' then I noticed somethin' dark risin' up an' smokin' behind him. It was his shadow had cotched fire! It was curlin' up jest like a sheet of paper does what's had flame put to it. That was the last straw with Dad. The thought of goin' through life without no shadow plumb discouraged him.

" 'Course he coulda stepped away from the shadow, but he didn't care to live no longer. He jest stood there until his body cotched fire, an' he was creemated right before my eyes! Yessiree! Right plumb to a crisp!

"They ain't nothin' more to tell. 'Course, I always did keep cool when things begin gettin' hot for me, so I managed to get back safe an' sound to the nearest settlement. I was sure enough cured of prospectin'. From that minnit on I devoted my life an' energies to tendin' cows!"

The laughter that arose at the end of the story almost drowned out the rumble of the train.

The brakeman was staring at Ananias with something akin to disbelief in his eyes. "An' do you mean to sit there an' expect me to believe that story?" he demanded scoffingly.

"Sure I do," Ananias answered in hurt tones. "May I be struck dead on the spot this very minnit if it ain't true." He looked unflinchingly into the brakie's eyes.

"Uh-huh. Maybe—maybe you're right," that worthy stammered weakly, "only it seems kind of—you know—kind of—well, I never heard nothing like that before."

"No? Wal, son, they's two things it'd be worth yore while to study up on: the Morlava Desert an' poker. Yuh get some hot deals in both of 'em!"

"Ananias," Doug declared gravely, "I reckon a good deal of that heat from the Morlava Desert went to your head!"

CHAPTER V

Flying Lead

A FEW minutes later Ananias was headed full tilt into another of his yarns. The air in the caboose was stifling by now.

Doug listened to Ananias a few minutes; then he made his way toward the door in the back of the car, seeking a breath of fresh air. He had just gained the rear platform when a movement, near the projecting roof, caught his eye. He glanced up just in time to see a riding-boot drawn up out of sight!

Doug stopped dead in his tracks. For a moment he thought it might be the brakeman from the locomotive. But, no, it couldn't be. Brakemen didn't wear riding boots. Somebody must be stealing a ride. Doug wondered if the man, whoever he was, had been spying on them. If so he had heard nothing but Ananias' story.

A moment more Doug stood there thinking. Then, on the impulse of the moment, he quickly retraced his steps back inside the car. No one noticed him reach into his war-bag for cartridge belt and six-gun. In another minute he was again on the platform, buckling on the gun.

It took but an instant to seize the iron-runged ladder and climb to the top of the swaying caboose. As he reached the roof, a cloud of smoke, drifting back from the engine, enveloped him. For a few moments he was practically blinded.

The country through which the train was passing at the time was all upgrade, and the engine was puffing furiously. Doug braced himself on hands and knees and waited for the smoke to drift away, the rush of wind nearly blowing him from his perch.

For a brief space the air cleared. Doug could see plainly the length of the train. No one was in sight.

"That galoot must be hidin' between cars," Doug muttered to himself. Again the smoke swept down on him as he made his way forward on hands and knees. At the front end of the caboose he stopped and looked down between the rushing cars. There was nothing to be seen except a confused blur of rails, ties and cinders.

Doug cautiously crawled to the top of the next car, fighting his way through the blinding smoke. He stopped a minute to let the atmosphere clear, and as he did so, from the smoke clouds before him, he glimpsed a stabbing flash of red. Whoever fired the shot had probably taken chance aim, as the bullet flew wild.

Doug's feet must have been in clear view, although his body was hidden in the dense clouds rolled back by the locomotive. That gave Doug an idea. He dropped to his stomach and glanced quickly along the roofs of the cars where the smoke wasn't so thick. He was just in time to see a leg drawn to the top of the car ahead!

Doug reached for his gun; pulled trigger; but was lost in smoke before he had time to see if the bullet found a mark. The train was swaying from side to side and he was hard put to it to stay on top.

Once he slipped and rolled to the edge, but quickly scrambled back to safety. Crouching on hands and knees, Doug glimpsed out of the corner of his eye, from time to time, a swiftly unrolling panorama of range country. All this while he waited for the gray-black sooty cloud, that enveloped him, to roll away.

When next the air was clear, Doug saw a man two cars ahead. At the same instant the fellow fired; and missed again.

Like a flash Doug was on his feet, right hand spurting lead and flame. Leaping the spaces between the cars, he jumped forward. The motion of the train wasn't conducive to good shooting. The man whirled and ran, jumping from car to car. Finally he stopped and crawled down to the shelter afforded between cars. With a whoop of battle, Doug threw discretion to the winds and, ignoring the uncertain footing, dashed recklessly ahead!

By now, only the fellow's head showed above the roof of the car. One arm whipped quickly into view . . . flamed . . . and a vicious slug hummed by Doug's ear!

AGAIN Doug fired . . . once . . . twice. . . . His enemy's head snapped back, then slowly dropped forward against the wood of the car. His grip relaxed from the iron bar, and the man slipped from view!

"Got him, I reckon," Doug muttered grimly, hastily reloading and creeping to the end of the car. Again he was lost in a swirl of smoke and cinders; then he peered down between the cars. Nothing was to be seen but the moving roadbed. Doug turned and glanced back over the rapidly receding twin ribbons of steel rail at the end of the caboose. Adjusting his vision to the motion of the train he made out a mangled *something* sprawled across one track. Was it all in one piece. . . .

For an instant a wave of nausea, not caused by the choking coal gas and smoke in his throat, swept over Doug, and he gritted his teeth. "I'd sure admire to think it was just the train was responsible for that," he said to himself, "but I reckon it was my bullet knocked him down under the wheels! Well, it was him or me."

Wondering who the man could be and why he had started the gun-play, Doug slowly made his way back over the roofs of the swaying cars and down the ladder to the platform. A moment later he was back inside the caboose.

The men were sitting pretty much as he had left them, and at first no one noticed him. Rusty Simms glanced up and started to laugh. The rest of the crowd looked at Rusty in astonishment; then they, too, their eyes shifting to Doug, went off into roars of laughter.

"Where's the minstrel show, Doug?" queried MacCrimmon.

"You figgerin' to put on a black-face act to help us pass the time, or somethin'?" asked Piute George.

"What's eatin' you waddies?" Doug demanded in astonishment. "You talk like you was—" He broke off short as he caught sight of his reflection in a piece of cracked mirror fastened to the caboose wall. His face was covered with soot, and was so black it was scarcely recognizable.

Doug laughed shortly, then swung back to face the grinning group. "Yeah, it's plumb funny to you rannies, but I got more'n fresh air when I went outside. Me'n' another feller has been swappin' lead for the last ten minutes in the smoke on top the train. Didn't you hear shootin'?"

The men sobered suddenly. "Hell, no, we didn't hear anythin'," MacCrimmon answered.

Doug nodded. "I guess you wouldn't at that, with the train roarin' along thisaway. Besides we was doin' our lead-slingin' several cars ahead. . . ." He went on and told the story in detail, the faces before him growing ever graver.

". . . an' then when I plugged him," Doug completed the story, "the feller slipped down under the wheels of the train. I looked back an' it nearly made me sick to my stummick at what I saw. That galoot's plumb finished!"

For several minutes no one spoke. The conductor and brakeman had drawn near and stood listening with open mouth and wide eyes. "Did you know we were carrying a passenger on top?" the conductor inquired sternly of the brakie.

The brakeman mutely shook his head, as Doug said, "No, Dan, he pro'bly didn't know. The feller could have been hidin' between cars when your brakeman was outside."

"Who do you s'pose it was?" asked Ananias.

Doug shook his head. "You got me. I don't know who he was or what he wanted my scalp for. I'll tell you what I think. Wild Bill Hatcher musta had a pard with him when he hit Los Tayos. The pard pro'bly stayed outside the saloon, then when he saw what happened

to Hatcher he kept outta our way, figgerin' he'd get me hisself in his own way. You see, this train slows for that sharp curve before it comes through Los Tayos, an' he coulda caught it on the jump."

The others nodded agreement. "It sure enough looks thataway," MacCrimmon stated. "I wonder did Hatcher have more'n one pard with'm?"

"I don't think so," Doug answered, "You see, if he'd had, they'd probably stuck together. I'm sure glad this thing happened. It'd be plumb disastrous if that bozo had gotten into Laramie the same time we did.

"I'VE got a scheme. The Masked Rider crowd knows we're comin', but they'll be expectin' us in a bunch. Me 'n' Mac'll be the only ones to get off at Laramie, an' we'll escape notice thataway. Skelly an' Ananias can drop off at Gun Corners before we get to Laramie. They can get horses for themselves an' Mac an' me, then ride in the other five miles. Rusty, you and George stay on the train until you get to Hudsonville. That's only a matter of ten miles or so farther on. You can get horses there an' ride back to Laramie."

"What's the idea of that, Doug?" asked MacCrimmon. "Why can't we all arrive at the same time?"

"Workin' things that way'll give you 'n' me a chance to look the town over. Nobody'll know but what we're just a coupla wanderin' hombres lookin' for a job. Mebbe we won't learn anythin', but it's worth a try."

Doug turned to the conductor. "You can make a stop for us at Hudsonville an' Gun Corners, can't you, Dan?"

The conductor nodded. "That's easy, Doug. Hudsonville is the first stop we make after Laramie, anyway, an' it won't inconvenience us any to drop two of you off at Gun Corners. We'll get word up to the engineer right away. What's this trip for, anyway?"

"I can't tell you now, Dan," Doug responded. "We'll give you the story on the way back. We're out to clean the worst gang that ever hit the Laramie country. I won't say more right now, only, take my word for it, we ain't leavin' until they knocks us off, or we clean them up proper!"

CHAPTER VI

LARAMIE

LARAMIE was considerable of a town, as cow-towns go. In the beginning it had consisted of but one narrow main street, but as business increased the settlement expanded, until now there were at least three or four cross streets, any one of which was a decided improvement over the original thoroughfare with its numerous saloons, two general stores, a bank, three restaurants and other miscellaneous buildings.

Mostly the buildings were of adobe structure, although several wooden false fronts reared heads along the main street. The side streets were given over to dwellings where the more decent class of people lived, and here and there a small garden could be seen flaunting bright colors which were a decided contrast to the winding, dusty road running through the center of Laramie.

The town nestled at the bottom of a broad halfmoon-shaped basin, through which coursed the Despejado River. Some contended that the basin was formed like an Indian bow, rather than like a half-moon, but after all, that was only a matter of opinion. From all sides of the town, there stretched a fertile spread of grazing land that sloped imperceptibly to the surrounding moun-

tain ranges, purple-hazy in the distance.

Round and about the few entrances to this vast basin lay gorgeously-colored upflung masses of rock—red, violet, green, yellow, depending on the time of day the amber sunlight happened to strike them. A veritable cattlemen's paradise so far as waving lush grass and plentiful water were concerned.

With a shipping point for cattle conveniently situated at the edge of town, the various ranchers had nothing more to ask for. That is, until the Masked Riders commenced their devastating raids. After that, affairs took on a serious aspect. Already many of the cattlemen faced ruin unless the stealing of cattle, which they were almost sure were being sold across the Mexican Border line, could be stopped.

It was shortly after three in the afternoon that the freight train pulled into Laramie. While certain cars were being unloaded, Doug and MacCrimmon, guns slung at hips, slipped out of the caboose with a hasty *"adios"* to Rusty and Piute George. As arranged, Ananias and Trigger Skelly had already alighted at Gun Corners, five miles up the railroad right-of-way.

"Looks like a right nice little burg," MacCrimmon commented, as they made their way up a side street, past rows of white-washed dwellings. "Ever been here before?"

"Yeah, once or twice. It's a long time back though, an' the town seems to have growed some. I been through here a coupla times in the last few years, but didn't stop off."

"It's a good thing," MacCrimmon observed. "They ain't no one li'ble to recognize you. . . . I'm gettin' plumb dry. When do we sluice down?"

"Plenty places to gargle when we hit the main drag," Doug answered, "'less'n Laramie has changed a heap."

A few minutes later they reached a corner turning onto the main street. Here all signs of neatness seemed to have disappeared. The street was dirty, wagon-rutted, and lined with places of business, fully twenty-five per cent. of which were devoted to the sale of liquor. This part of town, it seemed, was a law unto itself.

It was the hour of the afternoon siesta, and few people were to be seen. Along either side of the road stretched an almost unbroken line of hitch-racks to which were fastened a couple of teams and a scattered half-dozen of sleepy cow-ponies that switched ceaselessly at the flies.

The two men made their way along the elevated board platform that served as sidewalk until they came to a saloon from which swung a sign bearing the words: "Laramie Thirst Parlor." Here MacCrimmon paused, but Doug didn't slow his pace.

"Ain't we goin' to drink?" MacCrimmon asked, again falling into step.

"Uh-huh, but not there. That place looks too danged clean."

THE cowboy looked at Doug in astonishment. "But—but . . ."

"You see, Mac," Doug explained whimsically, "a man is known by the saloon he keeps. It's always been my experience that the hardest hombres hang out at the toughest places. That there place looked too orderly to be a headquarters for the Masked Riders. We gotta find somethin' different. Mebbe I'm wrong, but I gotta hunch that big 'dobe down the street half a block is the place we're lookin' for."

The building referred to displayed a huge sign on which was lettered: "Dance & Chance Saloon." The two cowboys noticed as they drew near that it was a shabby looking place. A large heap of rubbish was piled just to the right of the double-doored entrance, and although two windows adorned the front elevation, these were so dirty it

was impossible to see through them.

A moment later the two men entered the saloon. It was a large bare structure with a dance floor in the center. At one side were the games of chance, deserted now. Along the opposite wall stretched a rough board bar, presided over by a beetle-browed bartender with only one eye, the other being covered with a black patch. This was One-eye Maltz, proprietor of the Dance and Chance. Being somewhat of a miser, he refused to employ a regular bartender.

Doug and MacCrimmon moved up to the bar and gave their order as the bartender greeted them with a "Howdy, gents."

There were only seven or eight men lined at the bar, mostly cowpunchers, although two were greasers. They looked curiously for a moment at the Triple-Box-3 men; then returned to the business of drinking.

While they sipped their beer, Doug and MacCrimmon were alert for any talk that might touch on the Masked Riders. At one end of the bar, three men were talking in low tones. Finally one of them laughed and mentioned something like, ". . . they'll be holdin' up the bank next."

"Aw, the Riders wouldn't dare do nothin' like that," another grinned.

Again the voices dropped, and strain his ears as he would, Doug could hear nothing further. In a few moments the men finished their drinks and headed for the street.

"Say, feller," Doug addressed One-eye Maltz, "who's them riders those fellers were talkin' about? Seems like I heard 'em say somebody was held up."

Maltz's one good eye stared balefully at Doug for a moment. "The Masked Riders," the man explained shortly, "is a gang that's been operatin' around here. They held up Abe Tinker's general store last night."

"Shucks!" MacCrimmon scoffed. "I don't see how they could get much thataway. They ain't never no money in a general store to speak of."

"THAT'S how much you know about it," One-eyed growled. "Abe had nearly three thousand dollars in his safe. That's what he says, anyway. Been savin' it for years, only to have it all took away from him. Mighty bad, I calls it."

"Who are these riders, anyway?" Doug asked. "I crave to know something about them."

"Feller," One-eye retorted, "nobody knows. It don't pay folks to be curious around here where that gang's concerned. Curiosity killed the cat, you know."

"Uh-huh, I know," Doug drawled, "but satisfaction plumb revived that same animal!"

Maltz's one good eye blinked at this. He looked savagely at Doug. "Say, hombre, you're kinda fresh, ain't you! You must be a stranger around these parts, to talk like that."

"Bein' as you don't recognize us, I'll have to congratulate you on your keen sense of perception," Doug answered dryly. "Yeah, you hit it, first crack. We're both strangers. Mac, what do you think of that for brains, eh?"

One-eye's face flamed. "What yuh doin' here?" he snapped.

"Tryin' to get some enjoyment outta this luke-warm beer you served us," Doug grinned. "We ain't havin' no luck, though——"

"You know what I mean," One-eye rasped savagely.

Doug swung around and faced him squarely. "S'pose," he stated, "I was to tell you we're here to join the Masked Riders? What would you say?"

One-eye's jaw dropped in amazement. "Are you—are you crazy," he

stammered at last, "statin' your business to the world thataway?"

MacCrimmon laughed. "You kinda overlooked the question, Rum-slinger," he said. "We didn't say we *was* goin' to join. Not us. We're law-abidin', we are. We was just honin' to see what you'd say to all o' that."

Maltz relaxed and grinned foolishly. "Oh, havin' your little joke, eh, gents? I get you."

Doug nodded. "Yep, just kiddin' a mite. To tell the truth, we're lookin' for a job. Do you happen to know where a cowboy can grab off his fifty per, right now?"

One-eye scratched his head and appeared to undergo an involved process of thinking. "Well, I dunno," he said at last. "You might try Dell Turner over to the Pitchfork outfit. He's took on two or three extra hands lately. Them Masked Riders has been ridin' him harder than anybody else, an' I hear he figgers to increase his crew to see couldn't he stop the rustlin'. You see Turner. Mebbe he'll have somethin' fer you."

"I guess Turner is the man for us, then," Doug replied. "Have you seen him around here anywhere to-day?"

One-eye shook his head. "Nope, he don't often come in here. Hangs out to the Laramie Thirst Parlor when he's in town."

"We'll look him up," said Doug. "C'mon, Mac; let's give the town the once over."

The two men hoisted their war-bags over shoulders, picked up their saddles, and started for the street. "See yuh again, gents," One-eye called after them.

CHAPTER VII

The Clash of Steel

DOUG and MacCrimmon headed straight for the Laramie Thirst Parlor where they learned that Turner hadn't been in that day. Here they left their war-bags and saddles, to be called for later. From the saloon the two cowboys headed straight to a restaurant where they disposed of large platters of steak and potatoes, washed down with copious draughts of coffee. That over, they continued their survey of the town.

From saloon to saloon they went, drinking little, but, using the robbery of the general store as an excuse, talking to anyone who'd give them information regarding the Masked Riders. Little could be learned, however, as everyone seemed reluctant to voice an opinion when the subject was mentioned. One man told Doug that the folks who talked the most along those lines, were generally the ones to be made the victims of the Masked Riders' work.

It was late in the afternoon when the two cowboys again entered the Dance and Chance Saloon. The place was more crowded now, although the dancing girls hadn't as yet put in an appearance. The three men Doug had heard mention the Masked Riders, when he and MacCrimmon were in the saloon before, had returned. A tall slim Mexican with spike-like mustaches was with them now.

"Well, gents," One-eye greeted Doug and MacCrimmon jokingly, "did you get to join the Masked Riders yet?"

"Nope," Doug answered, "we ain't been able to learn where their headquarters are. Seems like this town is afraid to even talk about 'em."

At his words the three men, who stood a short distance away, looked up. One of them detached himself from the group and headed toward Doug. "I don't know who you are, feller," he advised, "but it ain't good sense to talk about that gang."

Doug sensed something of menace in the tones. "No?" he queried coldly, turning to face the fellow. "Why not? That's right down queer. I had an idea this was a free country, an' a man could talk as much as he pleased."

"That's where you're mistaken, mister," the man growled. "Fellers have been knowed to disappear plumb sudden for sayin' less than you jest did. My advice to you is to keep your mouth shut!"

"An' supposin' I don't?" Doug drawled softly, his gray eyes suddenly gleaming with the light of battle. "It seems to me you're a heap interested in that gang yourself. If I was asked right out, I'd say you know more about it than most folks does."

The fellow's lips curled back in a wolfish snarl. "Meanin' just what?" he snapped.

"Meanin'," Doug shot at him, the direct words cutting like a whip-lash, "that honest men don't have no hand in tryin' to hush up such affairs. You seem to be lookin' for trouble. It's here —*if you're game to take it!*"

Doug's arms were folded across his chest as the words left his lips. At the same moment the man reached for his gun. The weapon was actually clear of holster before Doug moved. Two shots blended, the man's bullet tearing high into the ceiling as Doug's lead ripped viciously into his shoulder!

Even as he pulled trigger, Doug had reached for his other gun. MacCrimmon, too, had drawn his .45 and was covering the man's two friends. Doug swung around to take care of the Mexican who accompanied them. The greaser's weapon was half out of holster.

"Drop it, Mex," Doug snapped, as he backed against the bar at MacCrimmon's side. The Mexican's hands shot into the air like a flash. The bartender was at the far end of the bar where Doug could keep an eye on him, so there was no danger from that quarter.

Doug and MacCrimmon, their weapons swinging slowly over the crowd which had backed against the far wall, looked for further trouble, but none came. The man Doug had shot had slumped, groaning, into a chair.

Doug called to Maltz. "Hey, One-eye," he ordered, "get some towels an' bandage up this feller's shoulder." At that moment it was Doug's intention to take the fellow prisoner and question him later, but as events turned out the man had disappeared by the time they left the Dance and Chance.

"We didn't come in here lookin' for trouble," Doug drawled easily, again giving his attention to the crowd, "but if they's anybody else cravin' to swap lead with us, now's the time to speak!"

"Seein' as talk of the Masked Riders is responsible for this mix-up," MacCrimmon added contemptuously, "it ain't likely *anybody* will do much oratin'."

THE Mexican, hands still raised in air, was glaring at Doug. "Thee senor he ees fast weeth thee shooting i-ron," he grinned wickedly. "I, Pablo Mercedez, admit that. Weeth thee knife eet would be different—no? I would show heem, eef he geeves me thee chance."

There was a challenge in Mercedez's tones that Doug's fight-loving soul found difficult to resist, but for the moment his better judgment prevailed. He shook his head. "Nope, I ain't mixin' in no knife-duel with you, greaser. I'm particular, I am."

A laugh of derision fell from the Mexican's lips. "Ho, the gringo ees afraid?"

"Listen, Mex," Doug answered, the words coming with deadly calmness, "I've yet to see the day when I was afraid of greaser scum. I'll put my trust in the ol' lead-slinger. Me, I don't carry a knife."

"Americano," Mercedez rasped, "me you shall fight weeth thee knife, or I say that you are one . . ." What followed was the vilest of epithets, a word unprintable. Doug's face flamed crimson and his fingers quivered on triggers. For a full minute he couldn't speak.

"Mex," the words came at last, and by this time Doug had himself well in control. "I ain't takin' that from nobody. I'll fight you here an' now—*with your own weapons!* Get me a knife."

He spoke to the rest of the crowd. "I'm leavin' it to you fellers to see that I get a square deal while me'n' this cross between a cockroach an' a *cabron* settle things—"

"Cabron ees eet?" Mercedez almost screamed. *"Poder de Dios!* You shall die—you shall. . . ." Unable to continue, so great was his rage, the Mexican went off into an inarticulate storm of vehement Spanish epithets. *Cabron,* meaning a he-goat, is in itself harmless, but in Mexico the word carries a double meaning, a meaning not to be explained in mixed society. Doug had guessed right, and it was the vilest insult he could have offered Mercedez. The Mexican almost frothed at the mouth.

Two or three men in the crowd quickly voiced their intentions of seeing that Doug got a square deal; the rest of the men were quick to follow suit.

MacCrimmon spoke softly to Doug from the corner of his mouth, "It don't look good to me, Doug. These hombres are too anxious to let you fight it out with the greaser. Looks to me like he was a top-hand with a knife, an' everybody knows it but us. I note them doors was closed plumb sudden after we come in. Must be they aims to keep strangers out until we're settled with. Mebbe we better shoot our way outa here. You ain't no knife man. That Mex is rarin' to cut you inta ribbons after what you called him. You sure got under his skin, cowboy——"

"Exactly what I was aimin' to do," Doug answered coolly. "I know I ain't no hand with a knife, so the only thing to do is to get him so mad he'll forget to use his head. Nope, they ain't no use tryin' to shoot our way out. I'm in for it, an' I'll have to see the business through. Here, take my guns. I don't want no extra weight holdin' me down. I note the Mex has shucked his."

He handed over his guns after ordering the Mexican to produce the knives. This the man did, procuring one knife from a fellow *paisano* in the saloon; the other he drew from under his shirt collar where it was slung at the back of his neck.

The arrangements were quickly made, with MacCrimmon acting as second for Doug who still stood with his back against the bar. He was sure now that no shooting would be started until the business with knives was settled. Everyone was expecting Mercedez to do the killing. There are few white men as adept with a knife as are the Mexicans.

The two knives were offered for MacCrimmon's inspection. There was little to choose between them. Both were long, cruel-looking, shining weapons, sharpened to the *n*th degree.

DOUG took the knife MacCrimmon handed him and advanced to the watching circle of men. The Mexican, blade poised in front of his body, and his eyes gleaming fiendishly, waited in the center of the circle. Doug had

stripped off his coat and vest and rolled up his sleeves. True to the vanity of his race, Mercedez had refused to doff the ornately-trimmed jacket and gaudy sash that he wore.

Gripping the knife-handle firmly in his right hand, Doug advanced to battle. "All right, Senor *Cabron,*" he mocked. "Start your carvin'. I'm ready."

With a yell of rage, the Mexican leaped forward. There came a flash of bluish light as the knife blade swept downward. Instead of trying to parry the stroke, Doug leaped to one side, and the knife hissed past his ear. He turned swiftly, his hand swinging in a vicious arc towards the Mexican's body. Mercedez moved easily out of reach, but underestimated the speed of Doug's stroke. The sharp blade slashed through the bottom of the Mexican's loose jacket.

Again the two combatants faced each other, crouching on bent knees, bodies tense. Slowly they circled like a pair of fighting cocks, each seeking an opening. Mercedez was cooler now. Doug's knife had come too close for comfort, and he realized he'd have to settle down.

Like a swooping falcon, the Mexican again lashed out! This time Doug didn't try to avoid the thrust, but moved forward to catch it on his blade. Came a slithering clash of steel on steel . . . the Mexican's blade lowered suddenly . . . thrust savagely again and again . . . only to be stopped each time, or pushed aside, by Doug's weapon!

The two men broke apart, Doug shifting like a boxer to get in a telling stroke. He lunged suddenly, but Mercedez, smiling scournfully, caught the blade on his own knife and turned it easily aside. The Mexican countered swiftly, but Doug had slipped out of reach.

It was plain to be seen that Mercedez was the superior knife man of the two. He advanced, retreated, advanced . . . knife blade working in and out like flashes of light. Doug was forced to the utmost to take up in headwork and agility that which he lacked in experience. There were times when it seemed his opponent's knife had surely slipped through or under Doug's guard, but always the blow was stopped or evaded in some manner which Doug himself scarcely understood.

The crowd about the fighters was deadly silent now, the only sound in the room being made by the scuffling of the fighters' swiftly moving feet and the ring of steel on steel. . . .

Again and again the Mexican closed. Finally his superior knife work began to tell. His blade touched Doug's shirt; ripped a long slash in the cloth without touching skin.

Again he thrust, and the shirt was slashed in a second place. A moment later a third cut appeared in the flannel cloth. Doug attacked with pantherlike speed, but Mercedez slipped back, avoided Doug's keen steel by the merest fraction of an inch and slit open his opponet's sleeve!

Doug glanced into the cruel eyes of Mercedez, and the thought dawned in that moment that the Mexican was only playing with him as a cat does a mouse. Undoubtedly it was Mercedez's intention slowly to wear down Doug until the finishing stroke could be delivered in comparative safety.

It was many years before Doug forgot the torture of the next few minutes —minutes that seemed like hours. Slash after slash appeared on his shirt until it hung in ribbons on his shoulders. Here and there faint pink scratches showed through where Mercedez's knife had pricked the tender skin. Even the Mexican was astonished at the manner in which Doug managed to slip away each time. Now that he wanted to finish the fight he was finding it difficult.

The pace was beginning to tell on

Mercedez. His breath came sharply between the snarling lips, and the perspiration stood in beads on his forehead. Doug, too, was growing tired, but a life of clean living was carrying him along. He knew his condition was better than Mercedez's, and that the longer he held out, the better chance he would have.

The Mexican realized now that the fight would have to be brought to a close in quick order if he were to be the victor. He returned to the attack with redoubled fury . . . in, out . . . in, out . . . slashing, stabbing, thrusting . . . moving swiftly around Doug. . . .

Up to this moment Doug had been on the defensive the greater part of the time, but now he saw an opening. He closed in suddenly, shooting his knife forward and up in a vicious underhand stroke directed at the Mexican's middle. Mercedez moved like a streak of light and caught Doug's knife on his own, waist-high.

THERE ensued a tense minute as each strived to force back the arm of the other. Here, Doug's steel-like muscle prevailed. . . . Slowly, slowly, the Mexican's weapon moved back. Doug's breath was coming in painful gasps now, but with the Mexican's knife clinched on his own he exerted every ounce of strength.

Mercedez's blade moved back another inch. The Mexican was growing weaker . . . his left hand moved up to seize Doug's wrist. Like a flash Doug stepped back and to one side. Mercedez, carried off balance by the sudden release of opposition, plunged forward. . . . Doug's blade swept down in a wicked curve that laid the Mexican's interfering hand open to the bone!

Gritting his teeth, Mercedez whirled back out of reach and recommenced his circling attack, his left hand dripping blood. If his attack had been furious before, it was fiendish now . . . bewildering . . . so swiftly did his knife flash that Doug scarcely knew from one minute to the next what to expect. Someway Doug evaded the vicious thrusts, but he felt it was time to bring things to a finish.

Mercedez had just sprung forward, thrust and missed. Doug feinted and missed purposely, as the other was retreating. Pretending that the force of the blow had carried him off his feet, he slipped to the floor.

With a yell of triumph, the Mexican bounded forward to inflict the death-thrust. Half-crouched on hands and knees as though struggling to arise, Doug waited until Mercedez was almost on top of him. Then, catlike, he rolled to one side, gained his feet, and as the Mexican hurled himself forward, Doug put all his remaining strength into a thrust that bit deeply into Mercedez's side!

So great was the man's impetus that he virtually threw himself on Doug's knife. Doug felt the sharp steel enter flesh . . . glance off a rib and then force its way on through until it was buried to the hilt!

Right then, had he brought into play the typical knife-man's code, Doug would have twisted the blade in the wound. But that wasn't his way. Anyway, it wasn't needed.

A shriek of terror was torn from Mercedez's lips as Doug wrenched out the knife. Already his clothing was stained crimson, and as the blade left the wound, a rush of blood oozed out. Mercedez, without another word, slumped face-down to the floor.

Doug straightened up and headed for MacCrimmon who stood near, pale-faced, guns in hands. So swiftly and violently had the fight ended that not a man in the place spoke for a minute.

"Gosh, Doug, that was sure close," Mac stammered, as he passed over Doug's guns. "Are yuh cut much?"

Doug, too, was pale beneath his tan, but he laughed shortly. "Got a few scratches, that's all. My shirt's plumb ruined." He took his guns. "Damn it! I don't like this butcherin' nohow. First that feller on the train, and now this. Me, I prefers clean gun-play——"

"You can have it then!" said a savage voice. Then was added a warning. "Nope—don't raise them guns." The speaker was hidden in the crowd preventing Doug from seeing him for a minute. Otherwise Doug would have started rolling.

A moment later it was too late to put up a defense. The two cowboys noted that practically every man in the room had a gun trained on him! Slowly, their hands reached toward the ceiling, after dropping guns in holsters!

CHAPTER VIII

"You've Made a Good Start"

FOR a moment a tense silence reigned as Doug and MacCrimmon faced the menacing row of guns leveled at them. Doug looked for the man who had given the order to raise their hands. He was a bulky individual, wearing a sheriff's star, who had pushed his way through the closed doors a few minutes before the knife fight ended.

"I s'pose you two fellers think you can come into a peaceful town an' turn it upside down, eh?" the sheriff growled. "Well, you can't get away with nothin' like that while I'm holdin' office. The citizens of Laramie put me here to uphold law and order, an' I'm aimin' to do it. We jail men for killin' in this town."

"It was a fair fight," Doug protested. "I even used the Mex's weapons. The advantage was with him—"

"Shut your trap," the sheriff ordered, "or I'll shut it for you. Bill Banner don't take no back talk from nobody! If I had my way I'd string you up, but I gotta do my duty."

"Duty hell!" MacCrimmon cried hotly, losing his temper. "If yuh had the guts of a man, you'd see that we got a square deal!"

Sheriff Banner's eyes flashed angrily. "I seen enough of that fight to convict this pard of yours of murder; an' I reckon I'll put you behind bars as an accomplice——"

"Let's string 'em both up," called a voice from the back of the room. "That's it," shouted another. "Get a rope!"

"Now, boys. Now, boys," the sheriff said hypocritically. "Don't try anything like that. These men are my prisoners, an' we don't want no violence."

Doug felt in his heart, and he was right, that the sheriff would make small show of resistance if the crowd tried to take his prisoners away.

"That'll do for you, sheriff," somebody yelled. "We're aimin' to hang these two fresh galoots, an' if you don't want to get hurt, you better get out."

At the same moment two men came forward with ropes and placed loops about the necks of the two Triple-Box-3 men. There were about fifteen men in the room and they took matters into their own hands, making no answer to the sheriff's feeble protestations.

Things were beginning to assume a serious aspect when suddenly a new voice sounded above the noises. "All right, you measly polecats, take them ropes off *pronto!* Ye've gone jest about far enough."

With sudden gasps and exclamations of surprise, the crowd parted and turned to look at the owner of the voice. There at the door, leveled guns in hands, stood Ananias Jones and Trigger Skelly!

"Up with 'em, you whelps of pukin' buzzards!" Skelly was saying savagely. "I'm shootin' on mightly small excuse!"

The crowd lost no time obeying the order.

In the space of seconds the situation had changed. Doug and MacCrimmon threw off the ropes encircling their necks, and seizing their guns, leaped across the floor to Ananias and Skelly.

DOUG whirled, crouched, guns weaving before the crowd. "We're leavin' now," he barked. "The first man to follow us through these doors gets a lead slug." He paused as his eyes sought out the sheriff. "You, Sheriff Banner, you're a disgrace to the badge you're wearin'. Keep outta my way from now on. We're within our rights here, an' we ain't standin' for no crooked deals!"

Banner cringed at the words. "Mebbe I made a mistake, Mister. I'm sorry——"

"You're s o r r y? H e l l!" Doug snapped. "Don't make no more mistakes of that kind, or you're li'ble to find yourself lyin' flat in a parade what's led by slow music. *Adios!*"

The next instant, the four Triple-Box-3 men had backed swiftly through to the street, the doors banging closed again.

Outside they paused a minute to see if an attempt was made to follow them. The doors remained closed.

"We got your broncs, Doug," Ananias was saying, as calmly as though nothing unusual had happened. "The're down in front of the Laramie Thirst Parlor."

Doug disregarded this. "Ananias," he voiced fervently, "I don't know when I was so glad to see anybody as I was to see you an' Skelly. I reckon we owe you a vote of thanks. . . ."

All four men were talking at once as they made their way along the street. Questions were asked and answered as Doug told briefly of the events leading up to the fight. "What I don't understand," he finally said, "was how you two rannies got here so quick."

"We were lucky," Skelly replied. "They was a horse dealer right near the station in Gun Corners. It didn't take Ananias but a few minutes to pick out four broncs. We was on our way almost before your train was outta sight. It didn't take us no time to get here. We stopped up the line away an' left the horses, then started out to see could we find you. We happened to be goin' by that Dance and Chance rattlers' nest when that crooked sheriff come along. Seein' the door shut, we figgered somethin' might be doin', so when Sheriff Banner pushed in, we was right behind him. He didn't see us, though, him bein' interested in the fight. We got to see the tail-end of your battle, too, but didn't say anythin' right to once. We was waitin' to see if anythin' happened after you finished the greaser ——"

"An' somethin' did," Ananias put in. "They's a bad crowd hangs out there, judgin' from the way they acted toward you."

"Yeah, an' I'm bettin' most of the crowd is members of the Masked Riders, too," Doug answered. "The sheriff included. However, we're here to get the leader of the band."

"Anyway, D o u g," MacCrimmon stated, "you've made a good start. One dead greaser to your credit, a feller with a shattered shoulder put outten the fight, Wild Bill Hatcher tamed, and a galoot shot plumb under the wheels of the train. Keep it up, cowboy! They won't be no gang left to clean pretty soon."

Doug nodded. "It shows they're sure suspicious of strangers when they jumped us thataway. I reckon they ain't takin' no chances on anybody get-

tin' away with anythin' in this town. They pro'bly aims to sew it up tight for themselves. C'mon, I gotta get a new shirt!"

It was nearing sundown now, and a short time later the cowboys made their way to a restaurant to kill time until Rusty and Piute George arrived. As there was no sign of the pair by the time supper was finished, they made their way about town, expecting every minute to run into further trouble. But nothing happened; even the sheriff kept out of sight.

"Probably that crowd's layin' low at the Dance and Chance," Doug speculated, "until they can get orders from headquarters. Don't worry, rannies; they'll be plenty trouble before we leave this part of the range."

Rusty and Piute George got in later in the evening, and after hearing of the afternoon's adventures, bewailed their fate in not having been on hand to take part in the activities. The six men hung around town until midnight when Bruce Malcolm arrived on the Limited, but no further trouble was encountered. Stopping only long enough for Malcolm to get a horse from the livery stable, the Triple-Box-3 men at once accompanied Malcolm out to his Rocking-M Ranch.

THE Rocking-M buildings lay grouped on a slight rise of ground, surrounded by cottonwoods, about twelve miles south of Laramie. Less than two hundred yards from the house ran a small willow-bordered creek that branched from the Despejado River. Here was all that any cattleman could ask—plenty of grass and water. Taken, all in all, the Rocking-M was considered "a right smart outfit."

Despite the activities of the day before, Doug and his men were up with the dawn. Upon arriving at the ranch, Malcolm had been in somewhat of a dilemma as to where to bunk the men. The ranch house didn't afford the necessary beds; neither was there sufficient space in the bunkhouse. The Triple-Box-3 punchers had settled this slight detail by rolling into the hay in the huge white-washed barn.

Early as they were on the scene, Malcolm was before them. He met them at the door of the barn with a "C'mon up to the house. Ma says visitors shouldn't oughta be made to eat the reg'lar chow what our cook hashes up. I told her you hadn't figgered on doin' anythin' else, but she went ahead an' got breakfast for you. C'mon."

Malcolm's wife was a buxom, matronly woman who soon put the punchers at their ease. As Rusty had put it, "anybody that can cook pancakes with maple syrup like Mrs. Malcolm, sure gets my bets!"

Breakfast over, the men sat smoking cigarettes while Doug and Malcolm talked.

". . . As it looks to me, Mr. Malcolm," Doug was saying, "they ain't no use tryin' to keep our business secret no longer. After what happened in the Dance and Chance yesterday, the folks we're huntin' will probably be plumb suspicious of us. I think it would be a good idea to call a meetin' of all the ranchers what've been losin' stock, an' let 'em know what we're here for."

"I reckon you're right, Doug," Malcolm answered. "I'll go down to the bunkhouse an' send word to all the neighborin' ranches. You fellers better come along with me an' look the outfit over. The sooner you get on friendly terms with my men, the quicker you can make your plans. They're all good boys, an' they'll be glad to help you."

A short time later, the Triple-Box-3 men met the Rocking-M punchers, among whom was Malcolm's foreman, "Spur" Rowley, a middle-aged, morose individual. However, Rowley made up for his appearance by shaking hands

cordially with Doug and his men.

Malcolm quickly explained the situation. "We're out to get the scalps of the Masked Riders, Rowley, an' Doug an' his boys are here to help us," he said.

Rowley gave Doug one of his sour smiles. "Well, I hope you have luck, Fraser. Nobody else has been able to get 'em. Count on me to help, anyway." He turned to Malcolm. "What was you sayin' about gettin' some riders busy?"

"I want that you should send the boys out to get word to the neighborin' spreads, Rowley," Malcolm answered, "so we can hold a meetin' an' plan what's to be done."

"Good idea," Rowley approved. "I'll get 'em started."

Later in the morning the Triple-Box-3 men were introduced to Malcolm's daughter, a comely miss of about eighteen or nineteen years, called Betty. From the first, Trigger Skelly showed a decided interest in her.

It was about the middle of the afternoon when the men from the neighboring ranches began to drift into the Rocking-M in twos and threes. There were Dell Turner, of the Pitchfork; Sam Follen, of the Bar-in-a-Circle; Roy French, of the Bridle-Bit, and four or five others. Each ranch owner was accompanied by his foreman.

DOUG and his Triple-Box-3 men were greeted cordially, if somewhat dubiously, by practically everyone. Things in the Laramie country had arrived at a state where the folk had given up hope of finding assistance, and the cattlemen surmised at once what the strangers were doing at the Rocking-M.

Malcolm called the meeting to order down in the bunkhouse, while cigarettes were being rolled. He mentioned briefly what was expected of the Triple-Box-3 punchers, and related in a few terse sentences what had happened at the Dance and Chance Saloon the previous day. The cattlemen grew serious while he talked and at the conclusion they all looked grave.

"That was sure an inhospitable way to treat you," Dell Turner said. He was a tall, raw-boned man about fifty. "Some of us oughta speak to Banner an' make him apologize. Trouble is, they's been so much trouble around here, that everybody's got so's they suspect everybody else."

"We'll talk 'bout apologies later," Doug answered shortly. "Right now they's more serious business. What I want to know is, have any of you got any clues, or any suspicions, that'll throw light on the subject?"

Sam Follen, a wizened-up bit of a man looked sourly at Doug. "If we had," he declared crabbily, "they wouldn't uh been no need for outside talent comin' in here. Mebbe you can do some good, but I'm doubtin' it. Seems t'me, the rest of us shoulda been consulted before Malcolm an' Turner decided to have you come here." He turned moodily and spat a long brown stream through an open window.

Doug stiffened. "Mebbe that's the way you feel about it, Follen," he replied coldly, "but it seems to me that Mr. Malcolm thought we could help out. 'Course, if the rest of you men think we can't do no good, we'll be glad to pull out *now*. We ain't achin' to horn in where we ain't welcome!"

Malcolm looked uncomfortable. "Follen," he said, "you're all wrong. Me 'n' Dell figgered some outside help could learn things we couldn't, if we could get them in unbeknownst. As it happened, the news leaked out an' Wild Bill Hatcher an' some other feller went to Los Tayos to get Doug. But I've already told you all that. However, I aims to have Doug an' his boys stay an'

see what they can do anyway——"

"Not only that," Dell Turner cut in sarcastically to Follen, "but it don't seem to me like *you* been able to stop the Masked Riders, Sam, from runnin' off your beef. I should think you'd be glad of some help. As to not consultin' you before we sent for Doug Fraser, I reckon that me bein' the heaviest looser in beeves, I got the most to say about that." He turned to the other men. "How's the rest of you boys feelin' about it?"

Immediately rose a chorus of voices approving Turner's and Malcolm's action. Roy French added: "It seem to me like Follen owes Fraser an' his men an apology for shootin' off his mouth thataway."

Follen suddenly relented. He stuck his hand out to Doug, saying, "I'm sorry, Fraser. Do what you can an' count on me in any way possible."

Doug accepted the hand, thanked him, and turned back to the others. "I guess they ain't nothin' much for us to do till we get somethin' to work on," he announced. "Me 'n' the rest of my punchers will spend the next few days lookin' around."

Nobody appeared particularly enthusiastic over Doug's statement. For some reason they had expected him immediately to start the ball rolling.

THE meeting broke up shortly after that and the men started for their homes. On his way through the door, Sam Follen stopped and spoke to Rusty Simms. "Say, is they any reason for us to expect any help from this Doug Fraser? He looks plumb peaceful to me."

Rusty looked Follen straight in the eyes . . . laughed shortly. "Don't be puttin' all your chips on that peaceful idea, Follen," he said dryly. "If anybody can clean out the Masked Riders, Doug can. That boy knows his graham crackers, he does!"

Follen shrugged his shoulders contemptuously. "Hmpf!" he grunted, and passed through the door.

Malcolm had overheard the conversation and now turned to Doug. "Don't pay no attention to what Sam Follen says," he advised. "He always was a sour cuss, an' his recent losses has made him sorta ingrown."

"Yeah, that's the how of it," Dell Turner put in. "You just want to remember, Fraser, that the rest of us is with you, if he ain't. Me, I'm feelin' better already, an' I ain't the least doubt but what you'll pull us outta our trouble. They's somethin' 'bout you an' your men that inspires confidence in me."

"Thanks, Mr. Turner," Doug answered simply. "We'll do what we can."

That night Doug gathered his men about him and talked long and earnestly for some time. To each man he gave instructions and when his orders were thoroughly understood they all rolled into blankets in the big barn.

Morning came and to Bruce Malcolm's astonishment Doug and four of his men had disappeared. Only Trigger Skelly remained to explain things. "You see, Mr. Malcolm," he said, "Doug an' the rest is ridin' the range to see can they learn anything. He left me here so's I could meet him in Laramie occasionally an' bring you news of anything he might find out."

Malcolm nodded, but Doug's methods were beyond his comprehension. Two or three of the Rocking-M punchers standing near were heard to snicker. To all appearances, Doug wasn't doing any more than anybody else had been able to do. But after all, they didn't know Devil Doug!

CHAPTER IX

Wild Bill Hatcher Again

TWO weeks passed and still there were no signs of Doug and the men who had left with him. Trigger Skelly made occasional trips to town, but so far as Malcolm could learn, Skelly hadn't met Doug. As a matter of fact, Doug wasn't as yet ready to disclose to Malcolm what had been learned.

Skelly didn't object to hanging around the Rocking-M, though. Not having any particular duties to perform, he spent considerable time in the ranch house kitchen, watching Betty Malcolm and her mother make doughnuts, or pies, or whatever it happened to be that they were making at the time. Skelly and Betty were getting along like old friends these days.

One morning early, Dell Turner came riding into the Rocking-M, his horse in a lather. He leaped from the saddle and dashed up the porch steps where Bruce Malcolm sat pulling on an ancient brier.

Malcolm got to his feet. "What's all the rush, Dell?" he inquired. "You seem all riled up."

"Riled up is right," Turner exclaimed. "You would be, too. Where's this Devil Doug hombre?"

"Out ridin' the range with his boys, lookin' for evidence," Malcolm answered. "Why?"

"Yeah, out lookin' for evidence," Turner fumed. "If he'd get busy he'd do somethin'. I'm beginnin' to think Sam Follen was right, Bruce. It ain't goin' to do no good bringin' Fraser here."

"Well, ca'm down, ca'm down," Malcolm advised testily. "Let's have the story. What's happened?"

"I'll tell you what's happened," Turner raged. "I been raided, that's what! Raided!"

"Raided?"

"Hell, yes! The Masked Riders . . . 'bout twenty of 'em . . . jumped us down in the bunkhouse last night. We didn't hear 'em comin' or nothin'. First me 'n' my men knowed they was on us, had us covered an' we couldn't do a thing . . . took our guns away. . . ."

"No use gettin' excited, Dell. This ain't the first time that gang run off some of your stock—"

"Stock nothin'! They forced me to open my safe! Cleaned it out . . . all the money I had. They was papers there, too, that I can't afford to lose. Dammit! Fraser'll have to get on the job after this or there'll be hell to pay. I'm sick of monkeyin' around, I am! I want to see that hombre. . . ."

It was some time before Malcolm could get him quieted. It was easy to see that this last blow had shattered Turner's nerve. He stormed like a madman, and seemed to blame Doug for all his trouble.

"Take it easy, Dell," Malcolm soothed. "I'll have some of the boys get busy an' scour the surroundin' country for Fraser. He can't be very far away. We'll get him right over to your place, an' mebbe he can pick up the bandits' trail from there. I'll admit the boy ain't done nothin' much so far, but he's got a good reputation an' I ain't lost faith in him yet."

"Well, I have!" Turner snapped. "I'm ruined, that's all." He sank weakly into a chair.

"I'll get busy right away—" Malcolm commenced, when he was interrupted by the appearance of Skelly from around the corner of the ranch veranda. He turned to Skelly. "Say, run down to the bunkhouse an' find Spur Rowley, will you, Skelly? The Masked Riders raided the Pitchfork last night. Tell Spur to get some boys

out to look for Doug. Dell wants that he should look his place over right away."

"I'll tell the boys what are in off the range to start lookin' for Doug right away," Skelly answered quietly, "but I can't give the order through Spur." He paused a minute; then added, "Spur's dead!"

MALCOLM straightened as though shot and looked at Skelly with unbelieving eyes. "Dead . . . dead?" he stammered, "Why—why I don't understand. . . ."

"I was just comin' up to tell you," Skelly answered. "A coupla the boys found him in a coulee 'bout three miles over yonderly. Two bullets through him. From the looks of things, dried blood an' such, he's been dead since about midnight."

"Wasn't he at the bunkhouse all night?" Malcolm asked. He was calmer now.

"Nope, I reckon not," Skelly answered. "He was sittin' up readin' when the boys turned in, but his blankets ain't been slept in—"

The full force of the words were suddenly borne in upon Turner. "Spur Rowley dead?" he gasped. His own troubles were forgotten in this new tragedy.

"Deader'n a doornail," Skelly answered.

"More of the Masked Riders' work, I suppose," Turner groaned. "Oh, hell!" His shoulders sagged suddenly, all the fight taken out of him. Finally he straightened. "First thievin', then murder," he said brokenly. "Well, Bruce, I'll be gettin' along back home. Send Fraser over if you can find him. I don't suppose it'll do any good, though."

Malcolm swung around to Skelly. "You beat it into Laramie. Doug might be there. If you can find him, tell him to get over to the Pitchfork fast as he can. I'll get my boys out lookin' or him, too."

"Right! I'm off," Skelly answered briefly. He hastened to the corral on the run and saddled up. Another moment and he was tearing in a cloud of dust along the old wagon-track that ran past the Rocking-M ranch house to the road that led to Laramie.

A multitude of thoughts coursed through Skelly's head as he urged his horse along the sage-bordered trail. He knew now that things were coming to a head. This last raid on Turner would probably mean sudden action from Doug.

There were difficult spots to negotiate in the trail, and although Skelly had to rein to a lower speed several times, he made the run to Laramie in something over an hour. He knew Doug would be in Laramie sometime that day, having already arranged to meet him there. Malcolm, however, knew nothing of this.

Not finding Doug on the street any place, Skelly dropped into the Laramie Thirst Parlor. That saloon was where he usually met Doug. After the long hot ride, Skelly found the cool interior unusually welcome. Two men were lounging at one end of the bar, while the bartender dozed fitfully at the opposite end; otherwise, the place was deserted.

Skelly had just given his order to the bartender when a wolfish snarl from behind caused him to turn. Swinging around, his eyes met those of a savage-looking individual who crouched just inside the door, guns in hands!

"Reach for the sky!" the man barked. "I was pretty sure it was you when I saw you turn in here. You're one of them smart fellers that tried to make a monkey of Wild Bill Hatcher, ain't you? I reckon to square accounts right now!"

Skelly had raised his hands at the

command, wondering who this newcomer might be. Now, at the sound of the name, the recognized Hatcher. But what a different Hatcher! Gone was the fringed buckskin raiment, the mustaches had been shaved off, and now he looked like an ordinary cowpuncher, except for the murderous light shining in his evil eyes.

The two other patrons of the bar had moved quickly out of gun range, but made no move to interfere. They knew Hatcher of old, and figuring that discretion was the better part of valor, decided it was Skelly's fight and none of their business.

KNOWING he was close to death, still Skelly laughed. "So you got back, did you, Wildflower Bill?" he taunted. "We all thought you'd never get loose from that glue in your saddle—"

"That's enough outta you, feller," Hatcher grated. "Where's this Devil Doug I hear is hangin' around?"

"That's for you to find out," Skelly laughed again. "What happened to your wild-west show clothes an' your pretty mustache; or should I say the half of the mustache we left you? Take off your sombrero an' let these fellers here see what a sheep looks like after his head's been sheared—"

Hatcher's gun tilted slightly. "You're goin' to pay for that business—"

Here the bartender took a hand. "Look here, Hatcher, you can't come in here shootin' up my customers—"

That was as far as he got. Hatcher swung one gun; pressed trigger. A bottle shattered to fragments close to the barkeep's head! Through the blue smoke floating across his vision, Skelly saw Hatcher's eyes still boring into him. The badman hadn't relaxed vigilance enough to give Skelly a chance to draw. In fact, Hatcher had scarcely taken aim.

". . . an' you'll keep outta this scrape," Hatcher was growling at the bartender. "I'm aiming to finish off this galoot, an' if you open your mouth, I'll fill you fulla lead." The barkeep shrank back in silence.

"C'mon, feller," Skelly invited. "Shoot an' get it over with. I'm gettin' plumb tired holdin' my arms in th' air thisaway."

Hatcher's lips were curled back wolfishly, and Skelly saw the triumphant light in the snaky eyes. That was Hatcher's way; to hold off the finishing shot and gloat over his victims. Therein lay his downfall.

At that moment Doug eased his form through the doorway. In an instant he had taken in the situation. Like lightning his guns were out, hammers back. He spoke just as Hatcher was about to pull trigger on the helpless Skelly.

"All right, mister," Doug drawled coolly, "put your artillery away!"

Hatcher whirled. In that moment Skelly drew guns. In the space of seconds the situation had changed, and Wild Bill Hatcher found himself between two foes. A look of fear crept into his eyes as he recognized Devil Doug. Slowly Hatcher returned his guns to holsters.

". . . he probably don't look familiar to yuh, but it's your ol' friend Hatcher," Skelly was saying to Doug, leveling his guns at the badman. "He's come back for a shave this time."

Doug looked again, then grinned. "Well, of all the changed galoots, you take the cake, Hatcher."

"What you goin' to do about it?" Hatcher growled. He knew the game was up, but to give the fellow his honest due, he was meeting the change in luck like a man.

Doug sobered suddenly. "Hatcher," he said coldly, "we oughta bump you off, but they's been enough killin' of late. We run you outta Los Tayos, an'

I reckon the same idea can be worked here. We're givin' you your chance. Git out!"

Without another word, Hatcher slunk out of the barroom. Doug and Skelly stood looking after him a moment; then laughed, replaced guns in holsters, and started for the bar.

Hatcher had just stepped into the street when their laughter reached his ears. In that moment he saw red. Whirling, he snatched up his guns and came tearing through the doorway, raging like a madman, guns spitting fire. It was that rate that unsettled his aim.

Three shots swept past before Skelly and Doug realized that Hatcher had returned. Doug's view was obstructed by the body of his companion who stood nearest the door. Skelly pivoted about, hands darting to hips. From his long blue guns leaped stabs of flame.

Hatcher laughed wildly . . . unleashed another hail of useless lead just as Skelly's bullets found their mark. The badman spun sideways . . . coughed . . . a snarl came to his lips as he crashed down. . . . "Aw, go t' hell," he mumbled thickly, his guns clattering on the pine flooring!

DOUG'S guns were out, but it wasn't necessary to shoot. Skelly's bullets had done the work. Hatcher struggled for a moment to rise, then sagged limply on his face.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Doug exclaimed in amazement. "Who'd 'a' thought that feller would've come back?" He crossed the floor to where Hatcher lay sprawled in death, eyes already glazing.

"I'll say one thing for 'm," Skelly said, something of admiration in his tones. "Hatcher died game. He had guts, comin' after both of us thataway."

"Malcolm always insisted that he was a bad customer," Doug replied.

A rush of people from the street prevented further conversation for a moment. The bartender told the story, explaining that the killing had been done in self-defense. In a few minutes the body had been taken away and the babel of voices died down.

Most of the crowd had drifted to the street again, and then Doug got the surprise of his life. Among those who remained were two tall figures, standing grinning at him. They were old Zach Teale and Big Jake, one of Teale's oldest punchers.

"Well! Vacuum-head," Teale addressed Doug. "I see ye been gettin' into trouble again."

Doug laughed and shook hands with the two men. "Nope, my trouble's just started, now that you're here! What's the idea?"

"It was this way," Teale explained, blue eyes twinkling. "Jake here was plumb worried 'bout not bein' with ye, so we turned everythin' over to Zeb Baxter an' th' rest, an' come down to see if we couldn't help out."

"You'd never left 'thout me, Doug," boomed Big Jake, "iff'n I'd been in Los Tayos the night you planned to come."

"I'm sure glad to see you, Jake," Doug answered. "You can help a heap." Then he sobered. "I don't know what we'll do with Zach here, though. He's too old an' decrepit to be any good to us." The laugh in his eyes belied the words.

"Shut up, Infant," Zach roared in pretended anger. "I brought my shootin'-rod along, an' I'm here to help."

"Don't get peevish, Moses," Doug soothed. "I'll find a place for you. The outfits hereabouts start round-up in a coupla days, an' I'll see can I get you a job toolin' a chuck-wagon. Do you think you can stay on a driver's seat 'thout fallin' off?"

Zach's answer was a cuff on the ear that sent Doug spinning over against the bar. "While you're thar, Useless,

you might bring back a bottle of Bourbon an' some glasses." Zach suggested. "Then we'll sit comfortable at one of these tables while you tell us what ye been a-doin'."

"I been doin' a plenty," Doug answered. "Th' ball starts rollin' right *pronto!*"

For an hour the four men stayed at a table talking, their voices lowered, suppressed excitement in their manner. It was evident that Devil Doug was ready to get into action!

CHAPTER X

The Masked Riders Unmasked

IT was dark that night. There was a moon, but a clouded sky kept its rays from view the greater part of the time. Consequently, except for the lights shining from doors and windows, the streets of Laramie were in shadow. The hours passed; gradually the noises of the town subsided, died away. In a short time the streets were deserted, and by midnight only the Dance and Chance remained open. Even this saloon closed early, sending the dance-hall girls and their partners home at an unusual hour.

It was shortly after two in the morning that a band of about twenty riders rode silently into town. Each man wore across his face a bandanna handkerchief, which allowed only the eyes to show under the jammed-down sombrero. Arranged in that manner a bandanna makes a mighty good mask.

No one of the band spoke as the horses loped along the quiet main street. A few pedestrians were passed, but it was too dark for the bandanna-covered faces to be noticed. Near the Laramie Savings Bank, the band dismounted and scattered. Some of the men led their horses into narrow runways that ran between buildings, others made their way down side streets and after tethering mounts, returned to the vicinity of the bank on foot. Then they, too, disappeared into the shadows.

In a few minutes the street was as quiet as before. One minute a band of riders had appeared at the bank. Five minutes later not one of them was to be seen, although each nearby shadow held its secret. Again silence fell. . . .

Fifteen minutes passed . . . an hour. Then from the opposite end of the town came a staccato drumming of horses' hoofs. This new band wasn't so orderly as the first, there was something furtive in each man's manner. Like the first band, these men, too, were masked; although in this case the regulation mask prevailed; a narrow piece of black cloth fastened over the eyes, with holes to see through.

The riders loped straight down the center of the road; then they, too, dismounted before the Laramie Savings Bank. One of the masked men who appeared to be the leader, spoke in low tones to his men, after which they arranged themselves about the steps of the bank as look-outs. Two of the masked bandits stood holding the horses as though a quick getaway were premeditated. The leader with two others made his way quickly up the steps to the bank doors. The next moment the peace of the night was shattered by a crash of glass as a heavy sledge hammer fell on the bolted doors.

Two minutes more and the leader and his two men were inside. In a moment a feeble light glowed within the interior of the bank.

At that moment two cowpunchers, much the worse for drink, came staggering along the pathway at the side of the road. At the sight of the crowd about the bank they halted, open-mouthed. Before they had time to cry out for help, they were surrounded.

Heavy gun-barrels brought down with sudden violence on the back of their heads sent them into oblivion before they had time to shout a warning.

In a minute the leader and his two assistants came hurrying out to the street. From inside the bank came a muffled explosion followed by a heavy thud, as the door of the old-fashioned vault was blown from its hinges. Then the three men hurried back inside, this time carrying suitcases which had been taken from behind saddles. There was another period of silence while the suitcases were loaded with currency.

One of the men holding the horses was suddenly surprised to notice a bandanna-masked figure emerge from the shadows at the bank's side.

"You go help the chief," the newcomer said calmly. "I'll hold the broncs."

"Who said so?" the other asked in some wonder. Then as the moon's light slipped through for a moment, "Hey, what's the idea of the bandana—"

That was as far as he got. From all around, bandanna-masked figures were leaping into view out of the shadows. The man reached quickly for his gun, but before it could leave holster, the other had pulled trigger!

The noise of the shot echoed and reechoed along the silent street. The bandits knew now that something had gone wrong. They, too, reached for guns. That first shot started it. In a moment hell was popping! Bright orange flashes stabbed the gloom; flashes that started back in the shadows between buildings and came jetting out as the bandanna-masked band closed to attack!

AT the rattle of shots, the chief and his two helpers came dashing through the bank doors, carrying loaded suitcases. For a moment the leader stood bewildered; then dropping his burden, his hands flashed to hips and came up spitting crimson flame.

The horses were loose now and went thundering wildly down the street, spoiling all chances of the bank-robbers' escape. Groans of anguish and the shrieks of wounded men split through the thunder of the shooting. The bandanna-masked figures were having the better of it. Each man had picked his opponent before the shooting started and the bandits were hurriedly swept off their feet.

By this time, half-dressed citizens were pouring into the street. Excited questions were asked, but not one seemed to know what the shooting was about. Powder smoke drifted heavily in the air near the bank where struggled a knot of cursing, lead-slinging men. The citizens of the town gave this spot a wide berth. Some one went after Sheriff Banner, but that worthy wasn't in his office.

Suddenly the leader of the bank robbers broke through the ring of fighters and, followed by two of his men, headed down the street at a run. He was nearly to the Dance and Chance Saloon when a voice was heard above the din of shooting: "C'mon . . . Dance and Chance . . . come a-runnin', cowboys!"

It was Doug Fraser's voice. Devil Doug it was who was leading the bandanna-masked band!

CHAPTER XI

Conclusion

DOUG, followed by Skelly and MacCrimmon, was almost to the Dance and Chance when a door in the building opened. There came a glimpse of lighted interior as three figures slipped inside; then the door banged shut. Once more the place

was shrouded in gloom, although a feeble light showed through the dirty windows.

In another moment the three Triple-Box-3 men had reached the door. Doug threw his weight against it, but the door resisted his efforts. "Locked," he panted. "Down with it, rannies!"

The three men stood back an instant; then they hurled their concerted weight against the obstruction. The door creaked a bit, but refused to give. Again they tried . . . something splintered, gave way . . . and they went tumbling into the saloon. Head over heels they went, crashing to the floor!

It was probably that fall that saved their lives. Inside the saloon stood the masked leader of the bank-robbers, a man on either side of him. Back of the bar stood One-eye Malt, six-gun in hand. As the door burst open, these four cut loose, aiming the height of a man's body. Consequently, the bullets flew harmlessly over the heads of Doug and his two cowboys.

Skelly was on his feet in an instant, followed by MacCrimmon. Doug commenced firing from where he lay. All three dropped their bandanna masks in the shuffle.

A bullet caught Skelly in the shoulder, swinging him around. As he moved, his left hand sent a shower of lead in the direction of the bandits. Two of them dropped to the floor. One was finished, but the other, propping himself on one hand, continued to roll lead from his gun-barrel. MacCrimmon sent another bullet into him, but it wasn't enough. The fellow was just throwing down on Skelly for the third time, when Doug moved his gun a fraction of an inch . . . he felt it kick . . . the man's head sagged suddenly. Before Doug could again pull trigger, a bullet from the bandit leader smashed the gun from his hand!

Doug laughed grimly . . . worked his other gun. The leader straightened suddenly, choked, then wilted to the floor.

For the moment, One-eye Maltz had been forgotten. Now, as a pause in the shooting came, he raised cautiously above the bar, this time holding a shotgun.

Skelly, his right arm dangling limply, saw his first . . . moved 'round, shooting from the hip. . . . One-eye's head snapped back suddenly, and he disappeared behind the bar in a shower of broken tumblers dragged down from the shelf in his fall.

The smoke was so thick now they could scarcely see. "I reckon that's all," Doug said wearily, as he gained his feet. "Hurt bad, Skelly?"

Skelly's grin crinkled his smoke-grimed face. "Nope, not much, Doug. It's bleedin' but I don't think the lead hit bone."

"Gimme your handkerchiefs, cowboys," MacCrimmon said. "I'll bind up this shoulder." Neither he nor Doug were hit.

"Listen," said Doug, as MacCrimmon busied himself with Skelly's wounded shoulder. "The shootin' down the street has stopped."

And stopped it had. Ten minutes later, the Triple-Box-3 men arrived, accompanied by others of the bandanna-masked band escorting a few prisoners—very few. Doug's crew had received some wounds, but no one had been badly hurt.

"That all the prisoners you got?" Doug asked of Zach Teale who was in the lead.

Zach looked at him, the light of battle still shining in his frosty blue eyes. "Yep. They's a lot of fellers sprawled in the road back there, but they couldn't move. I left a couple of the boys guardin' th' bank's money."

"Sheriff Banner was one of th' Masked Riders, too, like you said,

Doug," put in Ananias.

BY now the saloon was crowded with people. Among the punchers Doug had helping him was Bruce Malcolm. Now he stepped forward.

"It looks to me, Doug," Malcolm said, "like you've sure put an end to the Masked Riders. I'd like to know how you done it. Who's the leader?"

"You'll find him dead under that table there," Doug answered.

Malcolm approached the corpse gingerly; stooped and removed the mask. The dead leader was Dell Turner!

Malcolm got to his feet, faced Doug. "Why—why—that's Dell Turner—They must be some mistake—"

"Nope, they ain't no mistake," Doug answered soberly. "It's just another case of a good man gone wrong. He mighta been a good friend of yours once, but his craze for money overshadowed that."

Malcolm took another look at Turner's body, then heaved a sigh of regret. "If you say so, I reckon you're right. How'd you find out?"

"It was this way," Doug commenced. "You had an idea we was just ridin' around aimless the last coupla weeks, but every one of us has been busier than a one-armed man brandin' in fly time. Skelly was left at your place to see if anything turned up. The rest of us scattered. Every ranch in the neighborhood has been watched close by one of us."

Doug laughed shortly. "I got so I was a reg'lar detective, snoopin' around bunkhouses an' such. I was pretty busy, too, gettin' together a crew of boys I could trust. I knew us fellers from the Triple-Box-3 couldn't handle the situation without help. It was largely hunch made me suspect Dell Turner. When you 'n' Turner talked about havin' me come to Laramie, he saw you was plumb sot on gettin' outside help. So's you wouldn't get suspicious, he agreed to the idea, figgerin' it'd be plumb easy to watch me. The Masked Riders was to lay low until I give the job up as a failure and left Laramie. I knew you wouldn't do any talkin', Mr. Malcolm, so when Hatcher, and that feller I killed on the freight, come to Los Tayos, I figured it musta been Turner that spilled the beans."

Doug paused a moment to roll and light a cigarette, then continued. "When we first went to the Rocking-M, Skelly recognized Spur Rowley. Rowley has been wanted over in Texas for bank robbery for the last ten years. It was pro'bly him that told Turner how to blow a vault. Rowley didn't recognize Skelly, as they was never close acquaintances. I figured that Rowley was one of the Masked Riders, but on the other hand, thinkin' he might be goin' straight now, I didn't say anythin' to you."

"Spur Rowley a crook?" Malcolm gasped. "I'd never believed it. He was a right good foreman."

"Rowley sure returned to his old ways, then," Doug replied. "Three times within the last two weeks, Rowley has made a trip to the Pitchfork to see Turner, after the rest of your boys was asleep. Skelly followed him each time, an' then got back to the Rocking-M before Rowley did. That give me a hint that mebbe Turner wasn't as straight as he pretended. I got together a bunch of boys an' we raided Turner. The idea of us wearin' bandannas was to give Turner somethin' to think about."

"It worried him all right," Malcolm broke in. "He was pretty well broke up when he told me about your raid. Said he'd lost some valuable papers."

"That was the object of my raid," Doug stated. "I figured that if Turner

was the head of the band, he'd have some notes, or somethin', showin' who belonged an' how much was paid each man. I got what I wanted, too. It was all jotted down in a note-book which I'll turn over to you to use as evidence against the prisoners we took. Nearly all the gang that hung out here at the Dance and Chance was in Turner's pay, although they all were not actual members of the band. Turner, himself, never come here much; he used Hatcher as his go-between."

"Who killed Rowley?" Malcolm asked.

"I'LL get to that in a minute," Doug answered. "The night we made the raid on Turner, Rowley paid the Pitchfork a visit. Rusty an' me run into Spur on his way home. I figured to capture him, but he started to roll lead from his .45 gun. Bein' kinda slow, he was beat to the draw by Rusty; got plugged in the chest twice. Before he died, I showed Rowley his name in Turner's note-book, an' him thinkin' the game was up, told us a heap of things about the Masked Riders that we didn't know. It was him warned us of this bank-robbery that Turner planned."

"It's all clear now," Malcolm replied. "The Masked Riders is through for keeps. Everythin' Zach said about you bein' the man for the job, is true."

"Shucks!" Zach Teale growled. "Don't be givin' the boy a lot of credit he don't desarve, Bruce. Anyway, it was just luck—"

"No, it wa'n't luck," Malcolm denied. "It was headwork an' a fightin' spirit that handled this job. If you'll let us know how much we owe you besides thanks—"

His voice was lost in a chorus of protestations from the Triple-Box-3 men. ". . . yuh see," Doug was explaining, "we was all glad to help you —just for the fun of the thing. It got us outta a heap of work on round-up, too. Nope, we ain't takin' any money from you, Mr. Malcolm. That goes, as far as my bunch is concerned. As to the help we got from your local punchers, that's up to you an' them."

He paused suddenly and his brow wrinkled; then he continued gravely. "I tell you, you might give this wind-broken, cow-hocked, sheep-stealin' Zach Teale a couple 'dobe dollars for his work. It's all his part was worth. . . ."

Further words were lost in the roar of laughter that followed. Finally Malcolm was able to make himself heard again. "Mebbe I can do somethin' for one of you, anyway," he announced. "I'm goin' to need a new foreman . . ." He turned suddenly to Trigger Skelly. "Skelly, the job's yours, if you'll take it."

"There ye go, Bruce," Old Zach crabbed, "stealin' one of my best men. I'd rather ye took Doug. He ain't no more use t' home than a houn' dawg with the rheumatiz."

Skelly looked at Malcolm, then at Teale. "I sure hate to leave the Triple-Box-3. . . ."

"Thunderation! Boy! I was on'y kiddin' ye." Teale said kindly. "Go ahead an' take the job. It's a step up."

"I reckon I will, then, Mr. Malcolm," Skelly stated, his cheeks flushing. "They's somethin' about your Rocking-M ranch that I like a heap—"

"Yeah, I know," Malcolm cut in dryly, eyes twinkling. "My girl Betty told me. I reckon I'll be gettin' a son-in-law as well as a foreman."

"Skelly," Doug observed whimsically, as he grasped the cowboy's hand in a grip of steel, "it seems like I recollect sayin' when we left Los Taylos, that all of us might not come back!"

The End

The Badge-Toter Who Lived on Lead

By CHARLES D. RICHARDSON, Jr.

Author of "My Guns Are for Hire," etc.

Together, Crossdraw Taggart and Joe Cork had smoked their way through every brand of gunfight. That's why the whole cowtown of Sawbuck couldn't make Joe believe Crossdraw had turned yellow . . .

"CROSSDRAW" TAGGART—so-called by the gents of Sawbuck Corners because of the peculiar right hand draw the sheriff made to his left hip—had Joe Cork, his diminutive deputy worried plenty. Joe thought a lot of the big lawman. Crossdraw and he had kept law and order in Sawbuck for twelve years. Together, they had smoked their way through many gunfights. And Taggart had saved the life of Joe's frail wife, Hettie. He had loaned Joe the money necessary for her operation. Joe Cork would go through hellfire for Crossdraw Taggart.

That's why it cut Joe to the quick to hear the town muttering down alleys that Taggart had gone yellow. They said that he was afraid to face Bruze Dobson, Circle T rancher who had sworn to get Crossdraw for stringing up his father Abb for rustling.

Joe Cork stood in the sheriff's office, watching Taggart cross the street. The tall lawman wore a black glove on his right hand. His left arm hung limp. It had been partially paralyzed for years. Taggart stomped into the room.

"Howdy," he told Joe curtly, sinking into the chair at his desk.

Joe Cork nodded. "Howdy, Crossdraw." But Joe couldn't quite savvy Taggart, ever since the big man had returned from his mysterious five-week absence from Sawbuck Corners. Crossdraw didn't seem interested in his old friends anymore. He didn't ride out with the posse much, either. Spent a lot of his time at his cabin on the edge of town. Joe wondered if Crossdraw really could be worrying about Bruze Dobson, dismissed the idea with a grunt.

"How's that right mitt feelin'?" he asked curiously.

Taggart raised the gloved member. The lawman cleared his throat.

"It's comin' along all right, I guess. Aches right smart at times, though." He lapsed into sullen silence, fussing with the papers in his desk.

Joe Cork looked up. "Seen anything of Bruze Dobson lately?" Joe knew that Taggart had had that wounded hand when he returned to Sawbuck, was willing to bet his life that Bruze was behind the thing. Bruze probably had tried to bushwhack Taggart, only succeeded in winging him.

Crossdraw Taggart's lips were taut. "No, thank God," he said huskily, "I haven't seen him. I couldn't have faced him with this bum paw the way it's been."

THE sheriff got up from his desk and went back to the little storeroom in the rear. He closed and locked the door behind him.

Joe stared. What the devil possessed Crossdraw? He seemed as if he didn't want his hand to heal, so that he could have a showdown with the burly rancher. Joe Cork 'grunted. That wasn't like Crossdraw Taggart. In spite of his partially paralyzed left arm, in spite of any wounds he might pack, the lean sheriff always had faced leering

six-guns with the courage of cold granite. His crossdraw made greased lightning look sick. Joe had seen Crossdraw drop three gents before they could get their guns into action.

But all that was before Taggart had clashed with Bruze Dobson.

"Something damn funny," Joe Cork murmured, striding silently to the storeroom door.

There was a narrow crack in the rough cedar and the deputy squinted through. In the weak crimson of the sputtering lamp inside, he made out the bent figure of Crossdraw slowly working off the black glove with his stiff left hand. It wasn't the glove, however, twisting like a punctured spider to the floor, that made Joe sick inside and almost gulp out loud. It was Taggart's right hand, the one supposed to be wounded.

Taggart was holding it close to the lamp flame, studying it. There wasn't a scar or sign of a wound on the smooth flesh!

Joe Cork turned away. It was true, then, what the whole town was saying of Crossdraw. He *had* turned yellow. Deliberately, Crossdraw had covered a perfectly well hand, cooked up a story about being ambushed in order that he wouldn't have to face Bruze Dobson's guns. Taggart, the lead-slinging lawman who used to fear nothing short of hell and the devil. The man Joe Cork had always looked up to as the pillar of law and order, and all that was good and fine on this earth.

Joe stumbled outside, made for the Rusty Talon Saloon. Somehow he felt he couldn't face Taggart just then. He couldn't look him in the eye and not show how plainly he could see the lie written there. After all these years gunning badmen with him, Joe wondered dully, how could Crossdraw honestly avoid what plainly was his duty—to face Bruze Dobson like a man and have it out with him?

The little deputy pushed through the batwing doors and trailed over to the bar. He had ordered his drink, was staring gloomily at the sparkling liquid, when someone gave him a rough shove.

"Listen, you," growled a voice, and Joe Cork looked up into the grizzled features of the rancher, Dobson. Bruze had been drinking heavily, but that didn't make him any the less deadly. He had been known to shoot his straightest when in such condition.

"Cork," Bruze Dobson sneered, "tell that yellow pup boss of yours I'm ready for him, anytime. Tell Taggart I'm going to slug his hide until it looks like a sieve. No tinhorn lawman can string up my father and get away with it. If Taggart's man enough, he'll be here in this saloon tonight."

Joe Cork downed his drink. He was thinking of what he'd seen through the crack in the storeroom door. The revolting sight of Crossdraw Taggart looking at his ungloved gunhand which should be ready to sling lead at Bruze Dobson and all other such coyotes of the lawless clan.

"Better wait till Crossdraw's well," Joe suggested. "You wouldn't pull on a wounded man, would you?"

BRUZE and the rest laughed at that. They had an idea just how "wounded" Crossdraw Taggart was.

With an ache in his heart, Joe Cork carried his bottle and glass to a vacant table and slumped into a chair. Somehow he found it hard to be severe with Taggart. After all, the lawman had done more for Joe than any man living. And he'd been with Joe in gun battles which most gents would have avoided.

"But hell," Joe argued with himself, "Crossdraw didn't have to pull that wounded hand stunt. He could have at least talked things over with me first and—"

Joe was aware of a sudden, strained silence. His eyes swerved to the batwing doors.

The cold, motionless figure just inside made him stiffen. It was Crossdraw Taggart, and his right hand was ungloved. Expressionlessly, the lawman moved toward the bar. Men, watching him, shivered and wondered why. There was something peculiarly deadly in that cold stare of his tonight.

It was then Joe Cork saw that Crossdraw's gun butted backwards. Joe gasped. Taggart couldn't make his crossdraw that way. And Taggart's left arm was paralyzed. "Crossdraw!" gulped the deputy. "Your gun—"

But Taggart passed on as though he hadn't heard.

The sheriff stopped within ten feet of Bruze Dobson. "Dobson," Crossdraw said loudly, "I heard you was lookin' for me. Well, here I am. What you intend doin' about it?"

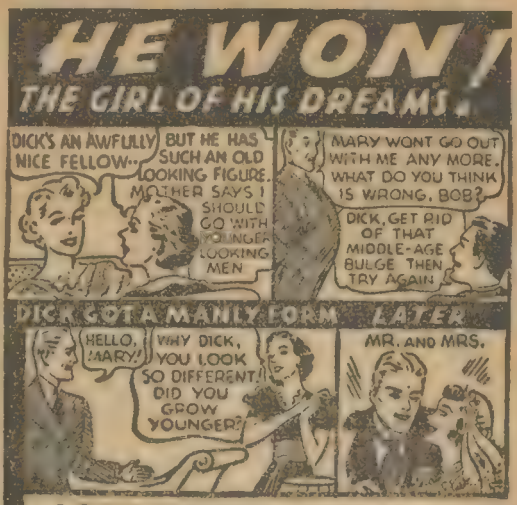
Bruze Dobson set his glass slowly back on the bartop. Like Joe Cork and the rest in the saloon he had spotted the gunbutt pointing backward. Bruze could get in two shots before *that* gun was out and spouting. Bruze sneered.

"Yeah, I want to see you. I'm gonna kill you, bore your yellow heart plumb center for what you did to my dad. *Taggart, go for your iron!*"

Joe Cork, three tables away, felt a wave of gladness sweep over him. Crossdraw, by some queer twist, had regained sufficient courage to face Dobson. Joe felt like rushing to Crossdraw's side, fighting with him as they used to in days gone by.

The next moment the roar of Dobson's gun shook the room.

Joe Cork screamed. The wounded Taggart wasn't drawing with his good right hand. He was pulling with his left! Slowly, like a crippled snake, the stiff arm curled down, hand closing awkwardly on the cold butt. Labori-


HE WON!
THE GIRL OF HIS DREAMS!
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MARY WONT GO OUT WITH ME ANY MORE. WHAT DO YOU THINK IS WRONG, BOB?
DICK, GET RID OF THAT MIDDLE-AGE BULGE THEN TRY AGAIN
DICK GOT A MANLY FORM LATER
HELLO, MARY!
WHY DICK, YOU LOOK SO DIFFERENT! DID YOU GROW YOUNGER?
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ously, the .45 cleared leather.

Joe Cork was on his feet now, shouting. "Your right, Crossdraw! For God's sake, use your right!" Then Dobson's gun barked again and Taggart's shirt sleeve ripped. Another slug chopped the lawman's side.

A tight grin played on Crossdraw's mouth. Tantalizingly, his left arm continued its upward swing. Like the uncheckable wheel of time rolling down the ages. Bruze Dobson stared at the arm, sweating. He fired again and the slug went wild.

The gun in Crossdraw's left hand bucked.

THE two men hit the floor simultaneously. Bruze Dobson was dead before he struck. Blood gushed from a hole in his forehead. Nearby, Crossdraw Taggart lay in a heap. Joe Cork reached him a second later.

The deputy raised Taggart gently in his arms. Due to Dobson's being unnerved by the lawman's surprise gunplay, Crossdraw had not been slugged vitally, though his chest and shoulder ran crimson. Joe wiped away some of the blood.

"You dang fool," he groaned.

Taggart's eyes were open, staring at Joe peculiarly. "Guess I'm too tough to croak," the sheriff grinned. "Gimme the makin's, will yuh?"

Joe fumbled out a nervous cigarette. His hand shook so it bobbed the glowing matchhead against Taggart's right hand. Joe froze, horrified.

Taggart jerked not the slightest from the sudden heat! And from the scorching hand came the odor of burnt wood.

Crossdraw looked down at the hand. He wiped off the black smudge.

"Artificial," he explained quietly. "They had to amputate the mitt in the Doverville Hospital. Blood poisonin' from that slug Dobson give me from ambush. As it is, I can't stand the wooden mitt on over an hour. I been wearin' the glove so gents wouldn't get wise before I was ready. I needed time to work up that new draw of mine. And Joe," Taggart's grin was broad, "my left wing's gettin' better every day. The doc said if I kept usin' it, it would loosen up complete. It'll take time, but I figure with you to help, I can hold down my job here in Sawbuck."

Joe Cork squeezed the other's arm. No man living had more guts than Crossdraw Taggart. With one hand missing and the other half-useless, the lawman had faced Bruze Dobson over six-gun muzzles and had won. Help Crossdraw keep his job in Sawbuck Corners? Joe Cork would stick with him till the cows came home.

POWDERSMOKE SHOWDOWN

(Continued from page 67)

here like this. I—Hardwinter, I hated to kill him. Damn it, I always *liked* the man!"

"Shows what a woman can do to men," Hardwinter said.

"It sure does. Take Sam's case: He started changing the minute he met The Widow; put talcum on his face when he shaved, and started dressing up. Sam, dressing up!"

He clucked his tongue and shook his head and started removing the white-toed, white-heeled red woolen socks Sam Hala had worn.

"Hey, Bick," protested Hardwinter. "You ain't supposed to take his socks off too."

"Oh, yes, I am," Bick Deems contradicted. "You see, Hardwinter, dressing up to go a-courting made a thief of poor old Sam. When he moved out of the cabin we shared, he took my Sunday socks with him. And then he had the gall to tell me if I wanted them back, I'd have to come and get 'em and take them off of him!"

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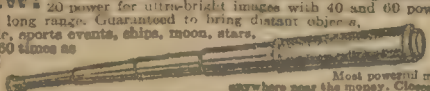

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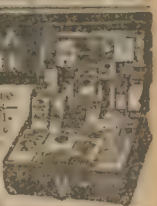

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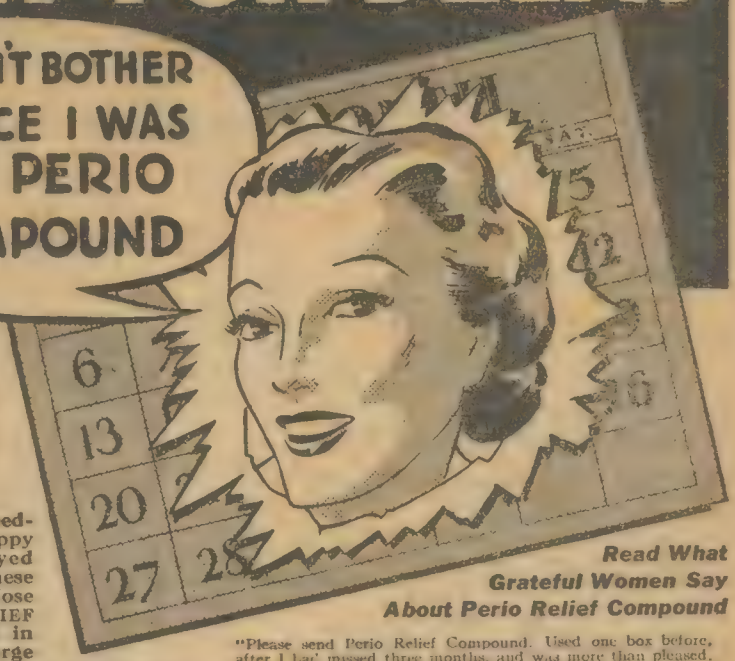

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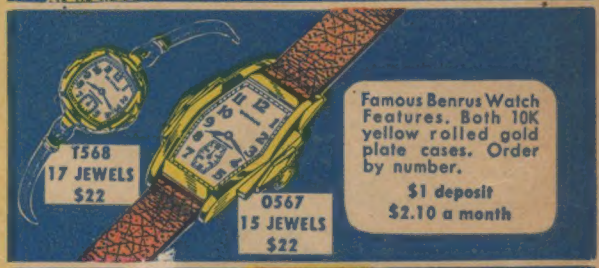

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